





THE AUTHOR

RENDEZVOUS ICHOGII

[EXPERIENCES, SHORT STORIES AND POEMS]

By

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To
A Friend no more

Old Soldiers never die.

I know. That's why I hide my feelings. I grieve in silence.

A crisis of conscience ?

Worse. Overcoming evil with good.

How ? Reconciling ?

*Possibly I don't know. The spirit
hovers to be placated.*

Situations are normal, personal and in places,
where they touch plans, imagined.

Resemblances, except where they are obvious, are
coincidental.

PREFACE

After I resigned from service, I could not get into the job of my choice straightaway. Time hung heavy on my hands. I therefore thought of composing my past and compiling odd ends.

The first part comprises of three experiences. 'Rendezvous Ichogil' is a personal memoir. It includes what I saw in the Rajasthan and Lahore Sectors. The second experience, entitled 'Sikkim Panorama', is a thumbnail sketch written when I entered the State with the Indian Army in . The last experience is an impression of the visit of an Indian Military delegation to the United Arab Republic in .

The second part consists of four short stories. 'Ghan-shyam Sundra' concerns a delicate friendship. 'Memories of a Musk Deer Shoot' is the story of a shoot in Gulmarg in winter. 'Spring Memories' and 'Autumn Memories' is a portrayal of ironic situations.

In the third part are poems. 'From the Outposts' were composed when I was on picquets in Kashmir. The others have been written over the years.

PRABHAT CHAND

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Under the head 'Experiences', 'Sikkim Panorama' was first published in "The Hindu" of Madras.

Under the head 'Short Stories', 'Memories of a Musk Deer Shoot', 'Spring Memories' and 'Autumn Memories' were first published in "The Mail" of Madras.

All the poems under the head 'From the Outposts' were broadcast by the author over All India Radio, Delhi.

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EXPERIENCES

RENDEZVOUS—ICHOGI

A Personal Memoir



*The Author passing out into Chetwoode Hall,
Indian Military Academy, Dehra Dun*

CHAPTER I

On the 6th of September, the first anniversary of the outbreak of war with Pakistan, I arrived in Sunderbani, the beautiful forest. Pakistan was observing her defence day. As a precaution against any trouble they might have started again, as a defensive measure, my battalion had moved up to strengthen picquets on the cease fire line.

Having shed off the fatigue of a jolting journey from Jammu in the officer's bus, Sudarshan and I sat back comfortably to browse over our experiences on the Ichogil Canal. The field telephone rang. It was the C.O.

"I am sure you have come back to serve, Khan Sahab", the old man said hopefully. It was funny to think of Jit as an old man. But there you are, he was a Colonel in as much as I could not shed off the far-fetched appellation of Khan Sahab acquired for service in Kashmir.

"Impossible, Sir", I replied. "I have come for my release from the Army. My resignation has been accepted a fortnight back".

I could sense a faint displeasure at the other end of the line. Jit had said he would have tried to dissuade me if I had not already made up my mind about leaving the Army before I had met him after a lapse of years.

"Why all this trouble? You could well have worked it out by remaining in Delhi", he remarked.

I could not tell him on the telephone why I had taken the trouble of coming all the way to Kashmir. Besides the satisfaction of splitting with the service from one's roots in it, which is the regiment, was the inexplicable longing to

breathe and feel the sights of places where I had spent the most impressionable part of my youth. In those days it was romantic to call picquets as outposts and our life was lived on the pattern of characters of fiction. We would descend on weekends to the smug warmth of the mess at the base to be renewed for our enviable tasks of patrolling the cease fire line and commanding men.

In the mess we went to extremes. We lost our names and pet names to conform to a self-appointed pattern. The C.O. was Big Chief Thunder Cloud, the most spirited young officer Billy the Kid, the senior subaltern, Kiddo, and I for being somewhat frank in my views acquired an Indian Chief's name. The coiner of these descriptions escaped one himself though, ultimately, he was caught too. This was apart from mischievous missions young officers were sent on while we were in Delhi. A young and sturdy Sikh officer who had newly joined was with consummate seriousness told to make a sketch of a reputed college for gauging the internal security threat. Armed with binoculars, map case and a compass, he arrived at the institution. At the gate he was surrounded by icecream eating girls. Before the scheduled hour, he returned to the fort and told the surprised tormenter that he would prefer to go to war than ever go near the college again.

Reflecting on the past, I thought I had returned for a distant waft of these sights and smells. It was only the next day when I went up to the Command Post and saw men hurrying to their positions, straightening the wire or calling out fire tasks—the endless round of coordinating defences, C.O.'s inspections, the Subedar Major supervising with interminable Ram Ram's, that I felt touched for the profession I was leaving. That night, after the toasts and speeches at a dinner, I left the dripping mess bunker to go up to the

highest point where a lone sentry stood beneath a needleless pine.

A panoramic view of Jammu, Akhnur, Chamb and Pakistan lay before my gaze. Here in the valley below was lit the spark of last year's conflict, now hushed by the soughing pines and twinkling lights. The sentry told me that the extremes of lights marked Jammu on one side and Rawalpindi on the other. I knew Jammu well, so I agreed. I had known Pindi as a child, when my father was there. I wanted to believe it, but could not. Even if it were true, it was false and alien. But to use an expression of Pasternak's, distances must not lose heart. I was convinced I could never divest myself of the nostalgia of these places.

I first came to Chamb when my father was commanding a battalion of the J & K Rifles there. I was barely out of school and was gripped by a child's fascination for soldiers, steel helmets, the authority my father wielded and star plates. I had been taken in by the charm of the Army and naturally looked forward to making a career of it myself. And here I was about to sever my relations with it for good.

A thick mist hung over the valley and the sentries changed. The light on the Pir Panjals was the same as I had first seen it when I came there as a Lieutenant of the Guards. The Intelligence Officer of the battalion guided me to my bunker. I had no tears but surely a depressed feeling.

The following day there were no bagpipes to skirl in the mountain air as it had been on the heights close to the Chumbi valley where I had left the Fourth Guards for Madras to take over as an instructor at the Officers Training School. The officers and a few JCO's who had gathered shook hands and told me I could return. There were old faces, grizzled and changed over the years with added burdens of responsibility.

At the base camp there were bills to settle and the fawning and gluey banfa to be disposed of. It was evening when I stepped into the jeep. Sudarshan who stood by to see me off remarked,

“Nine years is a long time, Sir. What have you gained in them?”

Without pondering over the question I replied in one word—‘Associations’. We saluted and the jeep rolled on the road through the fields soggy with seasonal waters and flanked by pine hills.

‘Associations’. Yes, that was all that one looked back on for having served in the Army. In the Army, the word association is of plural significance. It may be service with the Chief, as was my good fortune, or with one’s trench-mate whom I equally respected. It is a bondage which smacks little of the advantage to be drawn from the other.

CHAPTER 2

My roots in the Army were traditional. I did, therefore, feel sentimental that I of the third generation of service should be finally snapping the cord. My resignation was simply worded: "My father is blind and I am the only son. There is nobody else to sort out affairs at home". Thinking over it I could not restrain a tragic quirk and a smile. My father, blind since 1961, had passed away in July. I could not sit at home in a village nestled in the hills. If he had remained alive, I would perhaps have become a country gentleman and a recluse; reading, shooting, and going for walks in my lands.

With his death, the context changed. A while before he breathed his last, he put his hand in mine, blessed me and despite an awareness of the difficulties of life, I whispered that I would grapple with it. He smiled but soon his face contorted with anger. A prayer was whispered into his ear and I said that one word 'courage' which had marked his struggle through life. His eyes rolled and the breath jerked.

There was no one else in the room. For days we had been reciting the Gita. His face now lay in the charm of a peace hitherto unknown. As we dipped his body in the Jamuna, a sadhu who was swimming moved away to the inner sanctums of the river. The body was then laid on the burning pier. His face reposed on one side in that domineering angle which had symbolised pride and strife. Two of his old comrades of the Baluch Regiment, now senior General Officers, stood aside in silence. An old soldier had faded away but regrettably with bitterness.

My grandfather joined the Army sometime in the eighties of the last century. He served with a Frontier Force

Regiment as their surgeon officer. After the Mesopotamium campaign of the First World War, he resigned to the village where he set up a dispensary for the poor and opened a school.

A stroke of luck and soldierly respect for old associates in uniform got my father an opening in the Army. He was taken in the 3/2 Punjab Regiment in Waziristan. After a year's experience, he went to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst from where he was commissioned into a British Regiment (1st Kings). Going to Sandhurst from Kangra in those days was an achievement for one whom the local 'Thakurs' had seen in their midst. On his return he was greeted with more acclaim than due to a hero. They too had their stakes in his rise. Under a mulberry tree close to a mill he was feted. As a child, I remember I used to sit for hours under it book in hand.

A while later my father served with the 5/10 Baluch Regiment, and afterwards, on the frontier. The frontier in those days referred to the bleak highlands where the Pathans dwelt and was called the North West Frontier Province. During the last Great War, he served on the staff of the 9th Infantry Division in North Malaya. After the retreat to Singapore and the fall of that city, he was taken prisoner of war. On the insistence of nearly three thousand dogras, who stood by him as one man, he volunteered to raise The Azad Brigade of the Indian National Army. It comprised of a sprinkling of Sikh and Dogra regiments. After the Bangkok conference he discovered that the Japanese wanted groups out of the INA to lead their armies into Burma and India. He rebelled against the idea since they would only have served as agents. He asked for a separate front but was refused on the grounds that proliferation of the Indian resources was the most advantageous employment in the war.

With his Brigade he staged a walk out to court imprisonment and torture for nearly three years. This was at the height of Japanese power in South East Asia. On his return to India, he was released from service for his association with the cause.

Those who had followed the dictates of the Japanese were 'Blacks' for the British but in the eyes of national India, they were patriots. The officers who did not have a class following remained unscathed. They returned to the country to reap the spate of promotions available owing to the departure of the senior British Officer cadre. In many cases the advance was out of proportion to merit or ability to understand the dazzled prospect. They were 'Whites' and behaved like them.

The punitive Kashmir operations in 1947 offered ample opportunity to the better grade officers to exhibit their prowess upto battalion and brigade levels. In the higher echelons, the political necessity of narrowing the escalation overshadowed any independent action.

During this time my father, moved by a desire to do something worthwhile, volunteered to raise and train a battle-shattered battalion of the Jammu and Kashmir Regiment. He raised it in a short time, mostly out of those who had been with him in Malaya. In the operations in Jammu and Kashmir it had considerable success. It appears he had a penchant for commanding battalions because unlike many KCIO's, who nearly all became General officers, he did not rise above the rank of Colonel. The cause for this unfortunate stalemate in promotion belonged to the subterranean and inhuman level of maladjustment in the application of rules since advancement of some others would have been affected.

CHAPTER 3

Near Chawki Chaura the jeep carrying me broke down. There was a solitary military checkpost where the wireless worked with moody irregularity. We tried to convey a message to my unit but to no avail. Wearily I waited for a down convoy and to while away the time sipped coffee at a way-side restaurant. The radio blared pahari music. It was soft and breath-giving like the mountain air. Perhaps this was the last time I would be in uniform in Kashmir.

I was returning to Delhi without a job and an unknown future. On my way I hoped to find Dr. Karan Singh in Jammu. I had had his collection of poems for a long time and wanted to return it. He wasn't there and it was too late to make it for a friend's wedding in Delhi. I, therefore, spent the following morning in the temples in Jammu. It was only when I crossed the Ravi at Madhopur that an emotion surged in me. Had I decided to stay on in the Army I would have done my course at the Defence Services Staff College, followed by the Adjutancy of one of the premier training establishments, an assignment in Bonn as a Military Attache, then perhaps the command of a battalion. I had been keen to be transferred to the Foreign Service but entry into it was not open as when they had the political service. I draw reference to this old term because of association. In the political sense, my father had not benefited from opportunities open to those who had been associated with the cause in Malaya, and during military Service he had suffered loss of both rank and pension. I failed to see why I ought not to be given a chance in a field of my choice other than the Army. An old dicta that one must not regret too much and

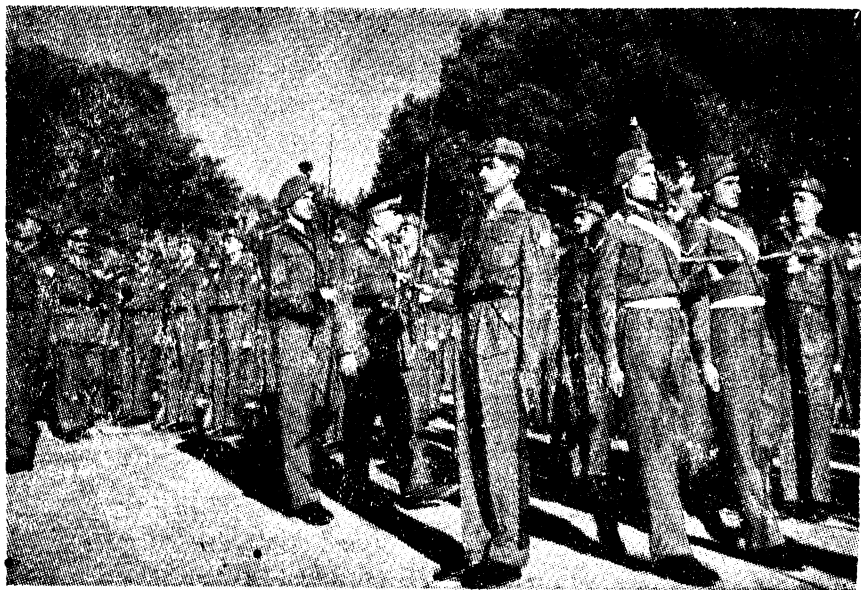
for too long got the better of me. Back in Delhi it felt well to be a free man again, to cast oneself wistfully in the realm of air and cloud. I would go out riding in the woods, swim and took to the curing drug of the Yogic touch. In between I made a journey to Bombay in quest of a job, saw people, realised how non-militaire the business of buying and selling was for me and relegated the prospect to a secondary level.

CHAPTER 4

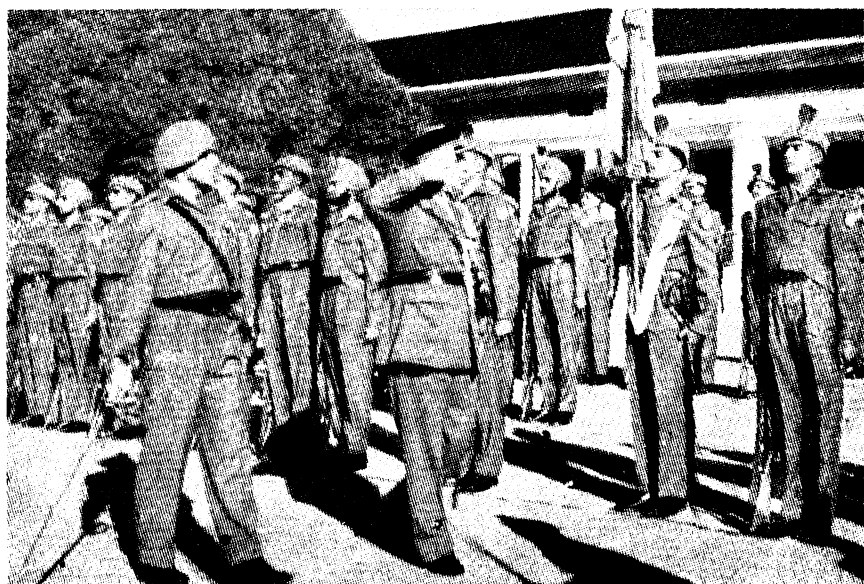
Slowly an inner compulsion like the one when I was entering the National Defence Academy began to work its magic on me. I had passed out sixth from the Academy at Kharakvasla and been the Academy Senior Under Officer at the Indian Military Academy. The sword of honour had hung between Nirpat Gurung and myself until a day before the passing out parade. But since he was better in sports than I, he had got it.

My first assignment in the Army had been at Rashtrapati Bhavan. The duties consisted of mounting guards, lolling in the lawns of the Bhavan, checking sentries and presenting guards of honour. I was an incurable romantic in those days. My battalion, the Fourth Guards, held an honorary colour since the time it was part of the Bengal Native Infantry. This was awarded for zealous fighting after the siege of Delhi in 1803. On one side of the colour the words 'Lake and Victory' are inscribed. If any subaltern did not know its meaning within a few days of his joining, he was put through the mill of laborious learning. I decided to go a step ahead. I had just done a course in Mhow and was keen to apply my newly acquired knowledge. I requested permission of the CO to take a signals patrol and to lend it a touch of history, I intended to march from Rashtrapati Bhavan to Red Fort via the Lake memorial, across the Jamuna.

The Lake memorial lies by the side of a village, a decrepit symbol of a great though infamous siege which heralded the rise of British power and the downfall of the Moghul Empire. Tired and sweating we reached the memorial to find an old man sitting on a cot under its shadow. It transpired



The Author with General Thapar inspecting Passing out Parade, Indian Military Academy, Dehra Dun



The Author with General Thapar saluting colours, Indian Military Academy, Dehra Dun

that his father had taken part in the siege and the memory of cavalry regiments camping under the mango groves was still fresh in his mind. In honour of the missing, we fired a salvo. Gone was the clash and throng of armies, the clatter of horses and the heavy advance of howdahed elephants. Cannons which had once rankled and boomed were dead silence now. They had long since become the scrap of museums and out-worn smithies.

The march, as planned, was to end its course across the river again but on the outer gates of the Red Fort. Unlike the mutinous rebels of the War of Independence, we were to come as a disciplined force with bagpipes leading. The rains came. I contracted fever and the Red Fort remained a hazy prospect. A few months afterwards, we went to Balnoi in Kashmir.

My life followed a hazardous but worthwhile course. From the Balnoi valley, I went to do a course in Skiing in Gulmarg. One evening, while we were returning to our wooden hut after a ski run, a Kashmiri servant came running to say that Major Bhagat Singh, the Commandant of the School, wanted to see me immediately. I was perplexed by the summons. Racking my brain, I could think of nothing that called for a ticking off. Besides it was impossible for Bhagat Singhji to tell off anybody without making the other, howsoever insensitive, feel the guilt of estrangement first. A more calm and unruffled person does not live in my memory. He was as graceful and easy on skis as in official or personal life. Watching him swishing down a slope, I would best describe him as an eagle on wing. It is only when you touched a hundred on skis, he used to say, that manhood smelled, a precept he lived up to in the evenings over bridge and liquor to the extent that when some keen enthusiast stood smartly in front of him to say a goodnight before leaving the mess,

he would greet him welcome with a suave 'Hello' and concentrate on his cards again. On merrier occasions he would burst out into a pahari ditty which is sung in all Dogra and Kashmir Regiments; 'Aje di rati ro more gadia', which translated runs like this:

Remain with me, O my Shepherd,
I shall cook thee spinach, my beloved
But remain with me tonight.

As always happened when we met for the first time, he asked me how my father was. They belonged to the same regiment and he had probably served under my father at some stage. He knew about his blindness and felt concerned upon showing me a signal received from Army Headquarters that I was to go on a secret mission somewhere on the Tibet border. Holding the order I walked back to my room along the snow-pitted path. My orderly was greasing skis, I told him to lay them off and get ready to move. That evening Jaswant and I played Beethoven in the growing dusk, sipped whisky and wondered what I would be doing a few days hence. Later, at a party in the mess, it was planned that I give a demonstration on skis in the moonlight. Either we were too gay to go out and clip them on or the plan simply petered out, but I found myself back in the hut cherishing the idea of going down the glowing slopes from on top of the moonlight ridge near Alpathar to the poplar strewn valley.

The first trickle of melting snow became evident below the meadow, the yellow blooms intermingled with the delicate stems of growing grass. A group of para-troopers were coming up. We passed saluting. They panted and I ran down.

The secret mission was the setting up of a post on the Mana pass in the Garhwal Himalayas before the Chinese

decided to do likewise. This was what then was called the Kaul-Menon Strategy of outflanking and outwitting the Chinese by deploying penny-pockets at strategic points on the passes. The task was accomplished and I remember the surge of pride I felt in planting the tricolour on the extreme point of march.

Snowdrifts hurtled down the bleak Tibetan plateaus and the sun peered again. Hands stiffened with cold, we planted the flagpole. The men cheered and Kanwar sang a Garhwali song. After this simple ceremony and the satisfaction of a task well done, we caroused around a fire in a Russian Arctic tent. The next morning an AN-12 parachuted our supplies for three months and we crawled like polar bears to fetch and stock them.

My departure was marked by emotion on top of that windswept mountain pass. On return to Badrinath, the snows had melted though strips gleamed on the rugged massif of the Zaskar Range and the ethereal fang of Nilkantha. Narendar Kumar, known as Bull, and now the Principal of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute had led an expedition to it the previous year. There was in the dawning spring something of that godliness and beauty which Frank Smythe, that great artist mountaineer, has so richly described in his book, 'The Valley of Flowers'.

Free of the shackles of ice axes, climbing ropes and pitons, I drifted in the religious fever gripping Badrinath. The gates were opening later in the evening and the Rawal was to enter at the head of sadhus, a large number of whom had already congregated beforehand. Each face I saw was an artist's problem and consummation. I longed for the power of the brush and palette.

By a pleasant coincidence, a fuming and mustachioed

Commander was also to arrive at that time. He had a penchant for the flamboyant and the earthy. He rode on a horse preceded by a sweating soldier carrying his Sub Area standard. The sadhus prostrated themselves before him, a reverence the Commander misunderstood to the extent that he nodded to his staff behind him. The staff being too cowed down to disagree bowed their heads acquiescingly. It was only when the Rawal came up that the sadhus realised their mistake. - They waved their hands and blurted angry protests. But the staff behind the Commander put up a brave front so that he might not see.

Bristling his moustachioes he asked me if I had stopped the Chinese. I replied I had planted the tricolour at the desired spot. But where were the Chinese? Across the pass perhaps or farther beyond. The little I had seen of Tibet had convinced me that those who could stay there, even for a military purpose, were inhuman. The sight of spiralling smoke in the distance, hazed by the frost, was equally inhuman and uninviting.

Extracts from a Himalayan Journal

A visit to the Vasudhara falls. On the way green meadows in the pure morning light. Meadow buttings and hedge sparrows fluttered past. Red starts and snow pigeons in coveys of hundreds. A very pretty sight seeing them rise. The empty deserted village of Mana. Crossed the Saraswati gorge over a bridge of what is apparently a huge rock between two sides. The indefatigable Bhimsen is² said to have planted this for future generations. Above it were the slopes on which we had pursued a mountain goat.

The countryside changed into one of wintry emptiness.

Snow splashed both sides of the valley. Here and there a grassy patch displayed yellow flowers with sharp petals. Laxmibagh was a slope dotted with leafless stunted trees on the other side of the Alakhnanda.

Returned to Badrinath in the afternoon. Slept in the sun outside the rest house. Dreams of a beautiful house in a garden—walked on towards the huts of yogis on precipitous ledges—came to a fall—two streaks of water like a thread from the feet of Vishnu—scrambled up rocks on a goat track to the source which was the end of a glacier—Juniper bushes and choughs in the water.

In the evening found the flowers dead. A large number of people had come up. Took a bath in the Tapt Kund. Bhagat, the beautiful youth, streaming with water suddenly came in view. Walked through bazar—stars and hills at night; the bright lights above the peaks.

Spent the day reading. In the evening the Rawal of the temple was to come. The Commander was also expected. Scrambled along the pavements crowded with yogis. Striking appearances, each different from the other. Thought they were mostly those who were inspired by free food to venture out in the Himalayas.

Arrival of the incarnate of Lord Shiva escorted by two gunmen. He carried a mace and entered the temple. Long hair, an air of authority, power and importance—not religious but awe inspiring and worldly. Crossed the bridge to the small hutments where a ragged row of yogis was being fed by a benevolent and naked Mahant. I decided to take photographs over which there began a furore.

The grass and flocks. Choughs with their agonised 'Con' when in flight. Nilkanth appeared out of the clouds.

Chestnut and green of Narayan Dutt's garden. The Rawal arrived in a palanquin. The carriers changed places. A ritual of drums being beaten. Passage of the idol. An embarrassed smile came on the Rawal's face as I bowed, he having been forewarned by the police that I was an Army Captain. Saw the passage through Bahmini village.

The Commander's arrival preceded by soldiers carrying loads, parts of wireless sets, map cases, a long line of mules and donkeys. Chinese-faced multeteers carrying thunder boxes. A colourless and tired soldier walked ahead with the Sub Area emblem. Yatri's mistook it for a divine insignia behind which was a not too religious man.

Drunken eyes beneath which lurked a cunning that respects many values. Alcohol had made them hazy and a little feverish. A good brush moustache. Reminded me of Birdie, short, podgy with an air of authority.

A young officer ran about not knowing what he was looking for. A worried major showed concern at the mix up in the arrangements. The Gujrati Bhavan people came. They had objected to the Commander taking onions and meat. As a result he shifted to the dak bungalow. I had to roll my valise and move into another room. I expected him to call the 'Old boy for a meal'. But he apparently was busy with his own affairs.

Nilkanth in the moonlight.

6 May 1962

The gates were to open today. Drums and flag poles were being carried. Rose early and packed. Charming Nilkanth with its cloudy blue mantle. Jingle of temple bells.

Inside a long line for 'darshan' with offerings of almonds

and dates in a plate. I went in by the side door. There were two separate apartments. The old temple and the new dome of Jaipur stone fenced in before the enclosure of the images to allow the devotees to gape at it. Fervent palsied eyes dotting upon a stone in shadow and shouting for the victory of Badri Narayan.

Left Badrinath for Hanuman Chatti. Saw a woman in white reading on a stone by the gurgling mountain stream. Walked along the hillside studded with star-like blue flowers.

At Pandukeshwar strolled down to Gobind Ghat. Met Gairola of the Survey of India. Saw the ebullient Swamiji discoursing on the 'Katha' (Prayer). In between he was insisting on "nautch gana".

Carrion and Himalayan Griffon vultures by the stream. Returned to the tent crowded with officers. Talked of the pleasures and miseries of travel.

8 May 1962

Met a Block Development Officer. He is a young man attempting equality with the officer class by emphasising his views on bridge-club.

Strolled in the bazar with Parminder. Beer drinking and excessive talk—that, my friend, is the Supply Officer.

9 May 1962

A feeling that one has been here endlessly. I want to go away. Baljit is expected in the evening. The Rajputs are itching to give him the present. The Brigadier was also keen on seeing him. An aura of heroes surrounds us.

The Supply man is emotionally shaken by his own dramatics. He is stimulated by the knowledge of his position when we apprise him of his failure to support us adequately.

He talks of Zorawar Singh marching his Army barefoot into Tibet. It is no logic whatsoever to justify absence of important equipment or scorn the fastidiousness required in acquiring it.

Went for a ride along the boulder strewn patch.

There was an evening party. Baljit who had taken a platoon of the Rajputs to Rimkin came slightly late from Tapoban having had to walk about 25 miles at one stretch.

When Baljit arrived, the crowd moved to greet him. He wore a cap comforter and his eyes 'were intent. He looked modest and his attitude suggested the polished education of a mountaineer.

CHAPTER 5

I became aware of my father's case when he became blind in . I represented as a result of which I became known in Army Headquarters over the years. It was on account of this, my record of service combined with what was, I admit without false modesty, described as an outstanding ability to instruct that I was posted from the Officers Training School to Army Headquarters on the staff of General Chaudhuri in November.

I heard of this posting on my return from a sojourn to the temples of Madurai and Tanjore. At that time I was working on the staff of the training team. We had just pioneered the first emergency trainees batch through their course of instruction. Now my task consisted of juggling with courses, lecture rooms, training areas and the syllabi. It was a relief from teaching.

The prospect of being in the capital as well as with the man at the helm of affairs in the Army was exciting. I had had occasion to meet only three Chiefs until that time. General Cariappa was from my regiment and the first Colonel Commandant of the Guards. When we were at Red Fort he had made an irregular ritual of visiting our mess on Sunday mornings. He would relate amusing anecdotes of life in the Army in his time.

Our battalion, the Fourth Guards, was originally the First Rajputs. It was raised at the end of the eighteenth century. General Cariappa converted it into the Guards in 1950.

On one of his tours of inspection, he went up to a Guardsman and asked him when the battalion was raised.

"1798, Sir", said the Guardsman.

"Who raised it?", asked the General.

"You did, Sir", was the smart and respectful reply.

He would also tell us young officers of his time as a subaltern, a theme lovingly reminisced by a relic in our mess of the days of King Edward VII. Nizam was his name. He was the mess waiter and a symbol of wordless deference. He was immaculate and correct to the point of telling us young subalterns that our spoon was a quarter inch out of the plate. Queen Victoria was a recent memory in his mind and even if a more significant political convulsion than the Great War and the Independence of India had come about, he would still have revelled in the era of Kipling and the burra sahibs. We loved and cherished this euphoria of tradition and champagne, glittering silver and dinner nights in candlelight.

General Thapar took our passing out parade at the Indian Military Academy in, which I chanced to command. General Thimayya had a special place in our hearts. He was in particular a hero to the soldiery and the young officer cadre. I remember the time when he and Panditji fell out in. Opinion among us swung on his side, although the withdrawal of his resignation seemed a comedown then. He was a soldier's General. The only time I came in contact with him is at a hunt in Poona. I wanted to ride the horse reserved for him. When it didn't come about, I outraced him while riding to hounds on a poorer pony. He was eager to know why a cadet was determined to beat him. When he was told, he came up to me and said I could have his horse the next time. The occasion, however, did not arise again.

It is generally not open to field officers to write about

General officers without earning a mixture of encomiums and derogatory remarks. (Like: Look at him talking big etc.). But if you have known the man, why not?

In my experience I haven't known a more far seeing, shrewd and quick thinking person than General Chaudhuri. I have had the privilege of questioning his authority to hold an enquiry into my father's case; a fact he acknowledged by way of appreciation, by naming an exercise run at Army Headquarters after me without being able to do anything about the case. Perhaps he felt better to side with the wrong in the case than the truth the suppression of which had deprived my father of high rank, probably equivalent to his, and consequent justice to me. In saying this I wish to, at the same time, express my gratitude for the interest the General showed in my future, knowing as he did all along that my father had been let down.

I cannot pretend to write about him as a soldier except that he is capable and has been incharge of three important events in Indian Military history after Independence. These are Hyderabad, Goa and the conflict with Pakistan. It is a measure of his success and those who attribute it to luck alone are envious. They are probably those who know he is head and shoulders above them. He is undoubtedly the most remarkable chief we have had—that is if achievement is to be gauged by actual success. He is a good conversationalist, a repository of humour, and excels in and appreciates oneupmanship. He does not perhaps wish to be cut out to be soldier's or a young officer's man in the sense that a soldier is one who smells the earth and a young officer who believes in brash emotional symbols. He often said, when asked about coups, that they were generally the prerogative of corporals and colonels. One could be more refined in one's approach to problems. I have a high regard

for his ability to deal with them. He breaks a problem into its essentials and then sorts each one separately with decision and ruthlessness.

I read his articles written for the 'Statesman' with avid interest. In substance they contain a little more than what is found in my standard set of professional precis with a laudable bit of original thinking. In presentation he remains unequalled for a nimble sense of humour and turn of phrase. It is unfortunate he remains a silent victim of the untold story deserving clearance. It is well known that he does nothing unless he can make a show of it. But who does not, if he is a seasoned judge of human nature.

On our return from a trip to the UJAR in , I found that my father's case hadn't been settled. Being hurt, I wrote a paper. On seeing my father's condition, I emphasised in it that militarily the usefulness of the martial classes (formerly called so) was a matter of expediency. It was not a disruptionist or parochial attitude but one borne out of suffering.

I am prepared to revise a generalisation of the statement in consideration of two facts. The myth of the martial has faded away with those who created it. Anybody who is paid to be in uniform performs his job. Therefore if the martial classes still feel a former sense of unity, it is so on account of an accumulated feeling of pride in achievement, their size in the Army, and their wounds. If their economic plight remain unchanged, it is so because they are inclined to do nothing else except carry a pack and a rifle and be led to their noisy and applauded destruction. It is interesting to see them now diverting their intelligence and resources to other avenues. Secondly, the deal the crippled, maimed and the families of the dead got after the recent conflict obviates a general feeling of grievance.



The Author at National Defence Academy, Kharakvasla



*The Author at the Pyramids of
Gizeh, Cairo*



*The Author's Father, Late Lt. Col.
K. Parkash Chand as C. O.,
4 Jammu & Kashmir Rifles*

I left the tense and crabbed atmosphere of salutes and authority with a happy feeling. It became imperative for me to do so for a number of reasons. One was that in the job I was in I had naturally begun to be charmed by the atmosphere of little work and drinks. Allied to this was the soul consuming ecstasy which follows in the wake of an easy life.

On the day I was to leave, the tangled woods were wet with the previous night's dew and the fog interlaced itself lazily in the branches. The gentle sprite of the woods was not there. I romped through the folliaged corridors. Then suddenly like a glow-worm beauty, the delicate and lithe form appeared with a scarf composing her hair. She saw me, waved, then dashed off—only the memory of the golden hair remains.

There was also the need to look ahead in life. It is nothing uncommon for some people to work for a short sighted gain behind a facade of feelings. When the charming and three dimensional machinations are accidentally revealed, it is best to regard the matter so affected as to be human only and therefore likeable. Attempts at disruption or slights are forgiveable. Out of envy and for gain they would even sacrifice their peace of mind only to touch innocent's happiness for which they inadvertently bear the guilt. Sympathy is lip service, respect for qualities a pose. But the head bows before the misunderstood courage.

At the time the trek gave over, the season in the hills was fresh and poignant. News was spreading of an outbreak of hostilities with Pakistan. I saw pictures of one of the most remarkable men in India probably putting politicians wise that an enemy was chameleon enough not to be saying no all the time. When I arrived back in Delhi those I had known looked at me as if I had created a sensation

by a statement of my conviction. I had simply enjoyed fresh air. Truth is never sensational. It just exists, maybe forever on the scaffold.

CHAPTER 6

On my way to Mhow, where I went to be trained as a Company Commander at the Infantry School, I stopped at Mathura to stay with the Second Marathas. This was Satish's battalion.

He was marvellously sprawled amidst a medley of clothes, tapes and a recorder playing hit tunes out of 'My Fair Lady'. We spent the day visiting his Company which he said would be the best unit in the Army. To give an example of his efforts he took me to the backyard of the barracks where the men were employed in raising vegetables. To my incredulous look he raised a slogan of glory to the Jawan and the kisan which was to make headlines during the Indo-Pak conflict. We rode out of the range of his efforts to the banks of the Jamuna. That afternoon, an officer, who had at one time served in an Indian regiment and was still in uniform, discoursed of his days with a battalion whose fortunes have been nobly recorded. I alluded to the writer to whom his response was, "His writing—well it's fine, but some of it is too much." But it was definitely better to be somebody other and finer.

The next morning I left for Mhow. The road was long and dacoit infested. As a safeguard I put two bottles of rum and wore uniform. They say dacoits respected uniforms and rum was a companionable bribe. Satish knew better. He told his orderly to accompany me upto Indore. The poor man only helped to light my cigarettes on the way and returned to Mathura to find the battalion gone to Kutch. It was tragic to hear of the orderly's death in the war later in the year.

The course at the Infantry School was an unique experience. As you drove into the school campus, a painted infantry soldier pounced at you, his moustaches bristling aggressively. In its own language it told you that victory is still measured by the foot.

A room was allotted, different papers were issued and we were asked to remember a garbled mass of material for the tutorial discussions. There was an amusing congregation. Half a dozen names sat around an instructor. By names I mean name slips stitched on one side of the chest to identify easily. First the instructor looked at them, asked you a question, then awaited a response by looking at your face.

Being under an emotional stress, I smoked a pipe, rarely worked the previous evening for the following days tutorial to face the distraught instructor warning me that he would jack up my ear. I was, however, accused of providing original and sound solutions—a judgement mingled with the horror of one who probably knew better than others, what to do beyond the scope of pinks. On the first day the instructor established his hegemony over the class by telling us that we were to be careful. He had been a Company Commander under fire for two hours. The encounter had affected him, giving him an attitude of indifference to paper tigers. I don't intend to flatter, but I daresay I learnt more from him than from the sheaf of papers issued to us.

The course itself consisted of shouting at the top of one's voice during the operation of war 'attack'. During defence, we dug trenches and placed impotent weapons to man our labours. The success of our effort was gauged by instructors asking us in the middle of our enterprise how it was going. "Bloody tough", you would reply and they would agree with an approving nod.

During the operation of war 'advance' we went ahead cautiously and during 'withdrawal' ran back as fast as we could but within the limited propriety of having to pretend dignity.

What appealed to me was the intelligent interplay of factors within a framework of appreciation, orders, communication and administration leading to the execution of an aim. The physical movements were left to the proud 'lumpen.'

CHAPTER 7

I spent two rainy months in Poona learning German and hobnobbing with celluloid gods. A single room in the Officer's mess served as a sanctuary. Each morning as I drove to the institute, my teacher would be walking down with a felt hat and an umbrella. He was a perfect example of a German Herr; inquiring and busy. Nonetheless he was a master of his craft.

The Director of the institute had been in the German Army in Russia. He respected only the medal he had got along with the others who had survived the stark Russian winter before the retreat. Wars are cruel but not too cruel to have in them a bitter glory. When I had gone to Sikkim in 1962 in the wake of the Chinese aggression, he had written to me: "Nichts ist schlimmer als ein Krieg." I had remembered that and when we met again he asked me if I was alright. I was but there is a deep rooted instinct of classes which finds communion in others. He carried a wounded leg from the war.

A week later, the sands at Juhu were blinking. The rain later made them soggy. Raaj was to have come that evening to bid me a goodbye. I sat under the awning, then received his phone call that he would meet me later at the Bambelis. A director joined us. The border skirmishes had been going on for some time. Brigadier Master had died in Chamb; he was already a hero in Bombay. The director asked me how far the war would spread. I told him it would never reach Bombay. Raaj quipped that they knew of war only in a square ten feet by ten feet.

The journey from Bombay to Kota through Ujjain was

relieved of its monotony by a singing mendicant I picked up on the way. Chance works its symbols strangely. He strummed a song on an instrument which sang of ancient legends of war and love. At a wayside shanty town I stopped for tea. The radio seized avidly upon the growing tension of war. Targets in Pakistan were being attacked. Reports of similar incursions into India by the Pakistanis were being denied. The mendicant bowed low and begged me to let him go. I hadn't stopped him. He ran out, clinging to his instrument. He stepped lightly over stones and puddles towards a sticky thatch of huts.

I entered the Officer's mess at Kota to find Major PP engaged in instructing carpenters to hinge the frame of a shying vixen over the bar counter. After we had had tea, I asked him what they did in the Regimental Centre. PT in the morning, office, lunch, games and dinner nights—a routine like the one I had undergone for five years with the battalion pleasantly varied by specialised tasks and frontline soldiering. The war had not particularly affected the life in the regimental centre. It was ironical to think that men were fighting and dying. Their deeds were only a source of controversy. I was awaiting the return of my battalion from Gaza to be in the midst of an experience if they were ordered to go to war. There was the tingling thirst to dismember the embryo of one's reactions under stress and analyse emotions. A common falsehood prevalent is for officers to hanker for action. Only the arduously professional and romantic fall for this gambit. Being young, I suppose I belonged more to the latter though professionally I had been elevated to the rank of Major on arrival in the centre.

During the conflict I was engaged with the others in the Regimental Centre in teaching some poor devils how to

distinguish their left from their right. Some were handsome and strong recruits. These were only a drop of the otherwise whole; spindly, shouting ordered pawns.

Pakistani paratroopers were said to be dropping everywhere, cutting lines of communication, blowing up dumps and damaging aircraft. All India Radio denied these reports vigorously. These stories were built up partly by the scared population. One night we suffered from the exaggeration ourselves.

An official informed the Commanding Officer of the Centre that he had himself seen paratroopers dropping out of an aircraft. Asked what made him so sure, he probably felt affronted that his integrity had been questioned. Of course he had seen the aircraft door open and the light blink off and on.

The light had apparently blinked on and off for it did so the following night and the night after. Two companies had ranged the countryside around the Chambal the previous night to wrestle with snakes and vegetation and find nothing.

The scare vanished, the hostilities were called off and all the noise and bustle of orators and battle died down. We continued to train human beings to be soldiers. Then one day, as I lay in my room, I received an urgent note from the Adjutant in his not too legible hand. 'Move to Jodhpur by evening train. See me in office now.' I hurried to his office to clarify the extraordinary summons.

CHAPTER 8

The adjutant looked as nonplussed as I. He asked me to choose my weapons as if I were going for a duel. I relied on the rifle. Just before leaving, the CO met me in the mess. We had a drink together. From his looks I could see he was subduing something. He didn't know what I was going in for. Delhi and Rajasthan Area had asked for a Major to work as a staff officer and since I said I wanted to rejoin my unit on its return from Gaza, my posting order would come by then. My reaction was of surprise. A possible reason leading me onto what appeared a mysterious assignment was that luck was giving me a chance to go through an experience I eagerly sought. Hemingway has stated somewhere that an experience of war is essential for one who aspires to indulge in the adventure of writing. Another and more thrilling one was that an uncertain feeling might have been aroused by my highly appreciated request to hold an enquiry into my father's case. I asked the CO again if the Headquarters were sending me to it and he shook his head in despair.

I hadn't moved more hurriedly on a mission than this one. My car remained in the porch of Sangi house while Munnu, my orderly, and I set out for Jodhpur. One enters the desert after Phulera; the long cavernous strips of sand dotted with dunes. To be going nowhere, to read Rupert Brooke and in the face of danger to think of the friend who loves you as a solace and strength—the interminable hours passed. Once she has loved you, she always will and you can rely on the thought that no ill luck can work if you can trust her.

The train pulled up at Jodhpur in the evening. I went

to the RTO's office and rang up a staff officer of the Advanced Headquarters of the Delhi and Rajasthan Area.

"So you are here", he said. An injured and hopeful mind suspects everything and my feeling was that here was the first link in the explosive drama.

"Yes, I am".

"Where is the cook?"

"I have brought him with me". A cook was required by the Delhi Area and I could well understand the staff officer's desire to know about him first. A bemused thought tickled me.

"The cook is ready, how about me?" I said feeling like a sacrificial god.

"Oh, don't worry!" he said. "You aren't committed".

I felt like asking him what difference it made but was sure to get a reply that if I was so, they would be concerned about my welfare. The question only added to my surprise.

"Who has posted me here and what am I going to do?"

"We wanted somebody who had been a good Quartermaster—and we have gripped on you."

I hung off, my doubts and wishes confirmed. As I was stepping into the train, I saw a subaltern moving about followed by a guard carrying a black box.

"I am a Major from the Guards", I ventured, "I am going to Pokran on an unknown mission".

He smiled broadly, extended his hand and said he was a Lieutenant of the Sikh Light Infantry and that he had the operation orders for the mission. "Bravo", I cried, "you are my man".

"You probably know my role in the mission?", I asked.

"We are going in for the attack and you may be part of it".

"Are you short of Company Commanders?"

"No, we aren't", he replied. "But there may be other objectives to tackle".

I agreed wearily and together we arrived at the desert terminus of Pokran. Soldiers sauntered on the platform. Some carried loads. Men of the Sikh Light Infantry who, according to the Lieutenant, were destined to go for the assault wore their turbans camouflaged in nets. Their packs were blanched and shining. A JCO received me as the new staff officer in the desert. He was ignorant of my designation but the reverent reception boded importance. I was given tea and omelettes within a catewire enclosed dump which was the base for the movement of supplies into the desert.

Nearby was a bazar and then the desert. We bundled into the front seat of a nissan one ton. A casual minded military policeman stood on duty at the crossing. He stopped the vehicle, growled there were too many in, then on seeing my epaulettes, slunk back and saluted.

CHAPTER 9

I have never felt more the need to be away from something I was being led into without knowing what. • Here I was on the road to Jaiselmer with the shiftless burning sand ripening into a golden white in the rising sun.

We had barely traversed half the distance when a crowd of jeeps was seen coming from the opposite direction. In the front seat was a Colonel with brass on his peak and collars and the CO of the Sikh Light Infantry. They were followed by their escort jeeps. I ordered the driver to halt and came out. They pulled up and I saluted.

"You are the new DQ", he said, answering my salute and measuring me with his trained and submissive eye.

"I do not know, Sir", I replied.

"You are".

"I am", I smiled since he was insistent.

"Water". The Colonel looked up at me with painful expectation.

I looked around. There was no water. The desert was bright and golden.

"Water?"

"Yes, water", he said, "Go down to the Headquarters. I am going to Jodhpur to meet the GOC for his operation orders."

"I have them here", interrupted the Lieutenant, coming out of the Nissan. The black box was cuddled under his feet.

“Good. Give them to me. I will still have to meet the GOC”.

I saluted, the Lieutenant gave the box to the escort and the caravan of jeeps moved out. We sat in the Nissan and I put my head back and dozed off.

Water, the desert, a battalion of the Sikh Light Infantry, the famous Ganga Jaiselmer Rasala, a squadron of which rolled liesurely down the Rajpath on Republic Day in their camel grey uniforms and shining hackles. There would be artillery, field or heavy mortars, a lot of transport to be sifted and sorted out. The EME detachments would have to be set up at various points in the desert, their security established. Supply logs and tables would have to be worked out, the provisioning of individual posts and special patrols. Ammunition was always a bug bear. The right lots got mixed up with the wrong cases. Fuel and fodder, clothing and welfare. This was my job in probably the longest line of communication and the largest sector up to brigade level in the Indian Army. And until then I did not know my function in being sent forward.

The task would be interesting and dangerous but I was officially unqualified to handle it since I hadn't had sufficient experience in staff work nor had I done the staff college course.

The Headquarters of the Jaiselmer and Bikaner sector was housed in a group of brick huts. In peacetime they were the barracks of a contingent of the Ganga Jaiselmer Rasala. I stepped into the Commander's office to find a Captain of the Grenadiers plotting on a large scale map. He turned around and to my joy it was, Nagendra, a country-mate from Kangra.

“Hi, DQ”, he said, clasping me.

“What on earth’s all this?”

“We are about to fight a war”, he exclaimed, setting aside the chinagraph pencils. He told the Intelligence Havildar to order some tea. After a snappy exchange of pleasant recollections, he quickly set himself to explain the situation.

During the operations, the Pakistanis had occupied certain posts on our side of the international border. They were to be evicted from there. The area covered by these posts was about a hundred miles long. Troops required to carry out the task consisted of a Sikh Light Infantry battalion, the camel corps and a few police battalions. The main problem was administration. Although troops were there, the backing to launch them into operation was either inadequate or missing. Two days later the Commander returned; briefed, loaded with orders but slightly confused.

The nights were becoming chilly. I cannot emphasise more my being out of place than that since nobody knew where and what I was going in for, I had not carried warm clothing. I borrowed my supply officer’s dressing chester to wear over my uniform. I can boast with a degree of jocular pride to be the only officer in the Indian Army who has done active service in this unusual garb.

CHAPTER 10

The operation was clearing of Ghotaru, an ancient fort situated on the road from Jaiselmer to Bhawalpur. The battalion ordered to undertake it belonged to the Sikh Light Infantry. The previous night we had mustered civilian vehicles to take them up to a point which they could use as a base. Shouting their regimental cry, they moved with whatever we could rig up for them. The fuel and rations were loaded in separate vehicles. Water was to be picked up from a pump at Asutur which a French Oil Drilling Company had built for themselves. The manager of the company had been caught in a one man duel with mujahids. It is probable that he was of the French resistance at one time, for he came out of the skirmish unscathed.

The evening they were to attack, we sat in tense expectation outside the Headquarters huts in Jaiselmer. A wireless link kept us informed of their movements.

Now the body of the dark bearded men would be moving across the sand; a string of the steel helmeted camel corps on either side giving them flank protection. Behind them would be a convoy of one tonners, their lights dimmed with clay, carrying stores for the attack and reorganisation.

The link broke down. Their last message was they were surrounded by mujahids. Their water and fuel had expended. The commander naturally had to do something to explain himself to the Area Headquarters as to the action taken on the message. He ordered me to collect as many vehicles as I could on the way, load them with canvas bags, fill up at Asutur and deliver the burden to the besieged.

An hour before sunset I set off with Gill, a motor mecha-

nic and escort. It had gradually begun to grow chilly. With the bandolier slung across the chest, an angular jungle hat and wearing the mazri dressing chester with blue lapels, I took the road to carry out the task. The sun rimmed the desert horizon. A suffused glow split the sand. Half way down we came across a jeep speeding towards us. It came to a screeching halt and out of it emerged a set of frightened faces. They were civilians who owned a shop at Banda.

"Don't go a step ahead, Major Sahib", one cried with hands raised up. "Banda is full of mujahids and bombing is going on".

"What happened to the Sikh Light Infantry rear?", I asked. I doubt if the bania attempted to smile, but his hand waved out towards a crimson glow half right of the sunset. "There", he pointed.

Sabre jets roared in the distance. Four of them appeared and in one lightning spiral they belched their bullets, turned in formation and made another run to rise up in a loop and disappear like dots. A reconnaissance plane hovered over us.

My mission had obviously been cut short. If there were mujahids at Banda, it would have been difficult to get across to Asutur to arrange water. Supposing they had only been strafed and there was no enemy to interfere with the making of arrangements, then the vehicles had nearly all been destroyed. I, however, decided to go forward and see the extent of damage.

A coterie of deer galloped across the road in quick spurts. I forgot the mujahids and the dump for the time being. Veering the jeep quickly behind them over the scrub and stone, I chased them. Gill understood my intention. He instantly lowered the wind screen and I jerked the jeep to a

halt. Placing the rifle over the hood, I fired in the direction of their vanishing forms. Gill thought I had hit the mark. So we pushed forward. Suddenly a rifle report was heard from the other side and we both jumped out.

About half a dozen soldiers were running towards us. I stood up and told them to halt. They stood still. One of them came running up.

"Sahib, pani", he said.

"What has happened to you?" I asked them.

"They have all dispersed," one replied.

"Where do you think you are going?"

"We don't know, Sir. There is bombardment and enemy is about".

In the meantime the others had come up too. Two of them flung themselves on a chaggal attached to my jeep.

"But why back?" I asked.

"Should we go forward then?" he replied exasperated and gulped a drink. Smoke and flame bellowed in the distance.

At that time it was impossible to rebuke a tired man. I had been long enough in the Army to know the agony of being bossed over when at the end of one's tether. I gently told them to be rested and await my return. They were not to go back. As I geared my jeep, one of the men came up to me. "It is futile, Sir", he said. "They have blown everything to smithereens."

The complete annihilation of the dump did not necessarily imply that I should not go and see for myself the possibility of arranging water. We had hardly gone a few miles when the sound of exploding howitzer shells was heard. A

spray of fire ejected from the ground as each shell burst. The petrol drums caught the heat and bellowed in smoke and flame. On one side was a hillock and beyond the burning dump, which was on a sandy plain, the white school building and shops. A few days previously, while on a round of the forward positions, the Colonel and I had sat there.

Dusk was falling rapidly, the wilderness around was being lighted up by the flames. High up sabre jets looped and swung gleefully at the havoc they had caused. While I was thinking about them, a buzz was heard in the rear and a sabre jet opened up its machine guns on the road. A sick trail, I thought, and Gill swerved the jeep into the bushes. The sabre jet swung around to straff again. But it saw another target, an open civilian vehicle behind us loaded with constables. It flew out at them, caused confusion and lunged into the inky blackness of Pakistan beyond the blaze.

As I stood up, Gill dusted my clothes. He asked me what we were going to do. I said we ought to find the officer incharge. An Ambulance pelted out of the broken country. I went upto it, followed by Gill. The driver gave an irritated growl. He told me to clear away. I said I was an officer. He switched off and jumped out. An exploding shell pitted the ground close by.

"We were looking for you", he said in anguish, "what are we to do with them behind?" He gestured towards the rear of the ambulance. Obviously, men were either dead or dying. He had mistaken me to be the officer incharge of the dump.

Three men lying on the seats groaned and cried. One had been shot through the arm; another injured in the head. One simply cried because the others were hurt. He was hardly twenty. I looked at him with compassion. "It is

alright", I said. "It happens in war." Within myself I knew that what I was telling him had been passed down to me by others. Men die for nothing inasmuch as they fight for nothing. I remember a German once telling me of the idea that prevailed in Germany after the war, "Kein, Vaterland weint fur Thr Diener". It couldn't be a better commentary on the futility of war. Yet here I was in a sense a victim owing to the injustice done to my father, who lay in a solitary room, blind and forgotten after the service he had rendered to the country.

The ambulance was sent back. Gill and I went towards the hillock to look for Nagpal, the young subaltern incharge of the dump. Bushes stirred. "Tham", a Sikh LI man shouted. "Friend", I replied. Gill closed up to me and whispered, "Sahib, ye to apna hi kunda ho jaeega, yeh hamen majahid samjh rahe hain." "Dost", he shouted to the Sikhi LI man. The man put down his rifle and saluted me with it.

"Where is Nagpal Sahib?"

"The devil alone knows it, Sahib", he replied. "Everyone has scattered."

There was little one could do in the falling night except watch the stars and wait for the morning to find the officer and restore order. We decided to wait a while lest the sabres decided to do a night run.

A short while after midnight I arrived at Jaiselmer. The situation was tense. The Sikh LI had not come up in the air. The Colonel who had been worried when I left enquired eagerly about the water. I told him of the disaster.

The Headquarters at Jodhpur was rung up. The colonel, Naginder and I sat outside in the sand. I briefly des-

cribed the straffing and the requirement of water. The answer was moral support. The DQ of the Area Headquarters invoked the blessings of God. It was agreed that two helicopters should be positioned with canvas bags in them containing water. They were to fly the following afternoon but as an immediate measure, the Brigade Major and I were to go in a jeep up to Asutur and if the situation warranted, further beyond. Two United Nations Observers were to go ahead of us in a jeep flying the United Nations flag.

CHAPTER 11

A colourful cavalcade set out in the morning. A thin trailing mist rose above the sand dunes. The palace was a forlorn spectacle. We kept a few hundred yards behind the U.N. jeep. The site of the previous night's bombing was a rubble.

Nagpal, the officer incharge, wore a haggard look. His men looked equally disturbed but determined to set up the dump under trees and in a better place. The UN Observers, who were both Latin American, studied the shell stumps with curiosity. It appeared that in their armies there isn't much insistence on weaponry or rockets. Perhaps it is not necessary. I made a wry face at the spectacle and they understood it.

"Terrible sight, Major", one said.

"Tooth for tooth", I replied acidly, voicing our determination to hit back.

Nagpal had selected a new harbour under the trees. Vehicles were being camouflaged. Some men sat back drinking tea. A pit was being dug for gas. A soldier came up with tea for us. His face was covered with dust. His beard fell in stringy warts.

Near Asutar the Brigade Major told me of his fears. He calculated that the battalion had been out of contact with Jaiselmer for nearly twenty-four hours. Anything could have happened within that time. It was a fear accentuated by straffing. It was quite likely that Asutar was already under enemy control in which case we would be going straight into a trap. He was right in his analysis of the situation. We, therefore, requested the UN Observers to

probe ahead in their jeep, neutralised as they were by the white jeep and a blue flag. Despite their own fears, they accepted the idea cheerfully.

Suddenly a dust haze lifted in the distance. A solitary jeep was seen coming from the opposite direction. We lay flat on our bellies in the sand and the Brigade Major picked up his binoculars to make out the tactical signs on the jeep. The UN observers followed suit, a reaction which testified to their inner feelings about our previous suggestion.

It was a Sikh LF jeep. The nearer it came, the more desperate were our thoughts about what it boded. A lone survivor, all else destroyed. It pulled up at a distance. The occupant must have been surprised at the sight of a number of jeeps pitched helter-skelter. Stealthily a Sikh LI NCO came out. He stood erect, his arms akimbo, and suddenly he smiled. We all stood up embarrassed.

"What is happening in front?", the Brigade Major asked gruffly.

"Nothing at all, Sir", he replied. "We have broken the fort walls and the enemy has fled.

"Is Asutar safe?", he asked.

"It is."

"And others?"

There is only one casualty we have had so far, he said, pointing to a soldier moaning at the back of the jeep. He had a bullet in his leg.

The NCO was ordered to go to Jaiselmer and report the situation and we pressed forward to investigate for ourselves. Our movement was no longer tactical. At Asutar the pump puffed and rocked, men bathed and the wind raised the sand above the tents. We lunched with the

Quartermaster of the battalion and sipped canned beer the UN Observers had thoughtfully carried.

The drive to Jithari Tibba, the Headquarters of the battalion, was over a track coursed by a continuous movement of vehicles in the sand. I can think of these sights only as flashbacks. Pooran and his camel squadron rolling liesurely between two sand dunes. The Battery Commander confused between his vehicles, his ammunition and guns. He had brought a mountain battery in the desert, had indented for mule rations but on arrival had found neither the mules nor the rations. He had complained to the supply officer who thought it ridiculous to indent for them. A controversy had ensued. The battery commander had implored, "But my love, how will my mountain guns move?" I had reconciled the two by stating the undying truth. "A will to fight."

Bali, who had got an award for confusing the enemy in the Rann of Kutch, the previous spring, was busy at the foot of the Tibba. He was inspecting the recoilless guns which, according to the NCO, had cracked the walls of the fort.

At the command post, the CO of the battalion sat like an angry monarch. He was staring at Ghoturu enveloped in the heat haze of the horizon.

"We attacked", he began. "Ran short of the necessities, blasted the walls and homed".

"You gave us the jitters by your silence, Sir", I ventured.

"Inevitable men", he said exasperatedly. "Had to keep a balance between the operations and confusion, and the damned wireless went off".

A hunter zoomed overhead.

"What happened to the air support?", somebody asked.

"You have it there, Sir", a subaltern interrupted bitterly pointing to the aircraft.

The CO overlooked the remark. We worked out the requirements of the unit's further operations. The men lazed in the gully down below. We threaded our way through their ranks to return to our jeep. The second-in-command, glimpsing through a copy of the Filmfare, passed by swaggering his stick.

CHAPTER 12

On my return, I received a letter from home. My father was unwell.

The next morning the plane carrying the GOC arrived. I had seen General Rajwade occasionally when I was with the Chief. He came down the ramp, shook hands and asked us our problems and deficiencies. We gave a synopsis and felt sure that something better than the existing state of affairs would be made to prevail. It wasn't just sufficient for the headquarters to badger us with warning encouragements that the 'higher ups' were interested and, therefore, the operations were to be made a success. We all had sufficient foresight to see that the operations were to expand with a larger commitment for the administration, the handling of which was beyond the meagre resources of the high sounding Bikaner and Jaisalmer sector. I could not overlook the humour of a former Commanding Officer of the Ganga Jaisalmer Rasala who when overwhelmed with odds remarked cryptically about the Pakistanis—"Not only did the dushts shoot at human beings but also at speechless camels".

Just before the GOC was leaving, I requested him for leave, knowing that the Colonel, who had begun to see the malaise, would try to dissuade me in the interest of my career. My CO at Kota had only sent me to a field area that I might become something short of a millionaire overnight. Besides I would by then receive an answer to my request to rejoin my battalion returning from Gaza. The irony was magnificent. Those interested in me did not have a notion of my newly acquired importance in the desert. There was the need to inform them of my part in a dressing chester.

General Rajwade pointed to the Colonel who reluctantly decided to give me three days off. We flew to Jodhpur and on the following day to Delhi.

The war had not changed Delhi. When I compared the effort and death on the border to the easy going ways of the dwellers, the noise they made while we were in it, seemed like a paper bag filled with air. In this atmosphere of unconcern and public applause for a few figures who symbolised the limited achievement, I met my father.

He was surprised that I should be a DAA & QMG after my appointment as ADC. He was happy that I was a staff officer. He asked me if I could take him along so that he might teach me some points of staff work. I told him I had already known too much of it for the time being to receive more coaching.

I sought to determine my extraordinary elevation. That nobody knew about it made soldiering in a dressing chester all the more a pleasant joke.

Upon my return to Jaisalmer, there yet remained in the catalogue of experience, the triumph and debacle at Sadewala and the rumblings of the unfinished march into Lahore across the Ichogil Canal.

CHAPTER 13

Sadewala was a post captured by the Grenadiers in a single fierce assault. A few days following my return from Delhi, I saw the casualties being evacuated in helicopters. It was evening. Sunset shafts fell on the wide airfield at Jaiselmer. The helicopter slumped on the pad. Casualty clearing parties ran forward, the door of the aircraft opened and the stretchers were hustled out.

Grewal had been shot through the chest. The bullet had pierced close to the heart. A rough bandage was wrapped around the shoulder blade and chest. In his excitement he had forgotten the throbbing pain. He extended his hand to two Grenadiers of his company whose plight was worse than his.

We rattled along the road to the advance dressing station. Grewal sat next to the Colonel and I behind them. He attempted to narrate the happenings but the Colonel subdued him. At the dressing station, Grewal took out a note book and pencil and begun sketching the objectives and approaches. The Colonel beckoned me to tell the wounded man that his action was history.

At the advanced dressing station, a partitioned hall in which beds were arranged close to one another, the enemy casualties were separated to a side. They had been interrogated by the Colonel and a decorated police Superintendent with bandit inclinations a short while before, being brought to the hospital. Lying in their mazi dresses with eyes covered, they blabbered the same tortured feelings in anguish as they had done in the Colonel's presence.

"Oh I am from Campbellpur," the wounded man had cried.

"So what?", the Superintendent had queried.

"It is not my fault, I was forced into this".

"So what? What's the name of your CO?"

"I don't know".

A smack and a cup of tea. You can't tell lies in purgatory.

One morning, while I was lounging leisurely on a camel, a note from Headquarters delivered to me through a despatch rider informed me of a singular task—"Deliver the George Cross to the suffering."

Apart from the medal, George Cross is old desert lingo for rum. This term was coined and used by the Allies during the last war. The Colonel was a veteran of the Eighth Army, having been blazed by German flame throwers.

The supply officer, less his dressing chester and I, who wore it, trundled along the road to Sadewala. Close to Ramgarh, a trijunction village, we ran across Brigadier Apji. He and my father had been together at Sandhurst. He had heard of his illness. He asked me how the old man was and whether I was going into flying gold (a term more literally used in the army). I told him my father was better and I looked forward to the sweetness of adventure.

On the way a platoon of engineers was padding the road. Balloon tyres were being fitted on to vehicles. Sahay, the doctor of the Grenadiers, stood by watching their labours. He wore a goaty beard and was known to have a manly reputation in the underpopulated desert.

The road had been rocked the previous night by a pair of mines planted to disrupt our convoys. Sahay was watching the sappers at work. His eyes gleamed as he looked at

me in a dressing chester and jungle hat. Angels pass, he asserted laughing. A few days later he was dead.

Sadewala was a sausage-shaped post divided by gullies. Two companies of the Grenadiers and an assortment of other troops had been slammed on it after the capture of the post. On the left was the fort Ghotaru and on the right Tanot, a point the Ganga Jaiselmer Rasala had tenaciously held.

When our jeep arrived at a defilade covered with a canvas awning, we both came out. PP of the Grenadiers, in command of the post, lay on his back. His hands were crossed behind his head. Two Subalterns sat by his side. One of them was Bedwin, a tall sturdy Sikh who had crippled the enemy by physical assault and grenades.

I hadn't met PP before. He extended a limp hand. His hair flowed upto his neck and his beard was scraggy. Tea was ordered.

"What have you brought us?", he asked the supply officer.

"Something you want most", the officer replied.

"Men, rifles?", he asked.

"Women!", somebody interrupted.

"Morale boosters", I said.

The supply officer took out a transistor the Colonel had kept for his use.

"Straight from a lady minister", he said handing it to Bedwin.

"Why, no charmers?"

"Wait till I return to Sadewala again", I enjoined.

PP switched on the transistor. A speech came up in

the air. With an irritated gesture he switched it off and put on music instead. It wailed and sang ludicrously.

I asked for a doctor. I had a boil to be plastered. A young medical officer who looked hardly over eighteen came, his head hanging low.

"Doc, meet the DQ", PP introduced us. The doctor continued to look down. A nursing assistant brought a tray and the doctor applied a splint on my shoulder.

"Cheer up doc", I said, "we have some rum going for you."

He laughed nervously, then a strange look came on his face.

"What is it, doc?", I asked worried. He shook his head first, then smiled.

"I simply feel that all may not be well".

"What makes you feel so depressed?"

"Simply the future", he turned around and went back to his medical canvas tent.

We sallied forward to a dune. In the distance Pakistani vehicles were raising dust and at one point crawling back in a circle.

"These may be new fireworks building up", I said.

"Fireworks! Could even be hellworks".

"Let us get the dust off them", somebody said. "Some more artillery".

"Awards.....the Colonel was interested in a particular JCO", I said.

"PP says he knows what each one has done".

We walked down with an uncertain feeling and drove

back to Jaiselmer. That night the Burmese and Nepalese Officers of the UN had a party for us. One of the UN Observers thought we were far too civilised to be a fanatic army as the one on the other side was. At least one could expect to be recognised before being shot at. "What can you do to a man who wants to get killed?", he said speaking exasperatingly about the mujahids. He related how as a precaution he had to put out his steel helmet first to invite fire before pulling out the rest of his body.

Later we stopped at the only restaurant in Jaiselmer worthy of a name. It had a few benches, a radio which blared for the benefit of the neighbourhood and was called 'Moonlight Whispers'.

It seemed the merriment was a prelude to a tragedy which overtook the desert a few days later. Pooran and Sahay were going along in a jeep from Tanot to Sadewala. Pooran was a man with a price on his head. They had laid an ambush for him en route by placing machine guns on both sides. As they came within range, the doctor was killed on the spot. Pooran was wounded in the leg that he might fall. He did and they came and bayoneted him piecemeal, gleefully and cruelly. He managed to ward off the tormentors but they pushed him about before he was rescued by a sweep of a covering fire from Tanot.

That evening when the helicopter carrying his body arrived at Jaiselmer, a gloom prevailed among the men. They had a confidence in him which made itself felt in the entire desert. A serious dent had occurred in their moral armour.

In the meantime the Air OP's arrived. Bhalla of the mountain gunners and Mathur, who had done well in Kutch, camped in tents close to the air strip. A mission began to

fly supplies to Sadewala. A blue scarf, given to me by a pilot as a souvenir, was appended to my dressing chest.

One night, a few days later, Sadewala fell to an attack by a brigade. The men fought for a while. Some died including the doctor. We lunged forward in jeeps from Jaiselmer to give blankets and food to the stragglers and lead them back to safety. The sea-saw of battle on the sausage sand dune had been more costly in lives than a million years of toil on it could produce to feed one man.

And yet the day a public man arrived we had to collect everybody around, mostly non-combatants, arm them, foist steel helmets over their heads so that he could spew the collected political venom against the other side through their half comprehending intellects. They merely sat dumblike, stretched their arms and spines to attention to return to washing clothes or cooking after the public man had left. The fighting soldiery was strung out in their desolate corners, quiet and self-forbidding. It was only when the gift sent by a lady minister arrived that a feeling of happiness and gratitude spread among them. They laughed and ate and joked about the pickles.

The ad hoc sector closed down. Regular formations arrived and a few days after handing over charge, I returned to Kota to be dined out for my final mission on the Ichgil Canal.

I hadn't stayed long in the Regimental Centre to acquire a languor which inhibits a vital approach to events, military or otherwise. In short I was restless to be out and moving. Late at night the following day, I arrived in Delhi to find my father cheerful but fast declining.

CHAPTER 14

We were gathered on the plain. The Brigadier leaning heavily on his stick stood before a mass of steel helmets.

“Mera kam aap logon ko larana hai”, he began his address. “Men khara rahunga aur dekhunga ki aap log larengi”. He was a Sikh, broad and decorated twice. Every gesture and word connoted command and a brutal and honourable justification to lead men to their destruction. He was a fine person, seemingly religious and understanding.

The commanding officer steadied the men, the Brigadier stepped into the jeep.

“Charlie Company Commander”, the CO raised his voice.

I hadn't been formally introduced to him. I straightened my steel helmet, something you avoided in the desert where one felt more at ease and free. The dust haze crippled the sense, edged the perceptions. A feeling sprung up in one that it was only worthwhile working through a dream. But in a battalion one had to be more deliberate and regimented.

The Brigadier grasped my hand and shook it heavily. He looked one keenly in the eye.

“Welcome to the Brigade, Major”, he said pleasantly.

I remained silent. He drove off in his jeep spitting fumes and a whirl of dust. The officers gathered around the sand model, the JCOs kept to a side. They took out their note-books and pencils and waited in eager anticipation. The officers did likewise but most of us knew what was to happen. The CO gave out the orders.

The plan of attack across the canal was simple. With two battalions forward the brigade was to attack in echelons. Tanks were to be in support till the final charge and then were to join up. Likewise each battalion was to have two of its companies forward. Artillery was to support according to a pre-arranged fire plan for which targets had already been registered.

Opposite us were the Baluchis, a regiment in which my father had served. The irony was supreme. I was to fight those in the service of whom my father had given his early life. Craving for the recognition of this part of service was a standing grievance of his with people on this side of the Canal.

The broad plains were smirched with the yellow dust that had been churned by tanks of a Cavalry regiment returning from a forward reconnaissance. Evening was settling on the leaves and trees. Partridges quailed in the distance; their call rung a haunting note from some distant past when caravans of the old Indian Army moved down from the hill stations to do their winter manoeuvres before being sent off for their inoculation of fire on the frontier outposts of the Empire.

Ajai stuck his head out of the turret, his black beret inclined rakishly.

"Please net your set on my control", he shouted above the whirring drone of engines. I sent Subedar Adhikari to instruct the company signaller to net the set. My confidence in Subedar Adhikari's knowledge of signalling was restricted to the accuracy with which orders were receipted and carried out rather than in his technical ability to control the set. He was a company subedar, a junior officer who commands by an exercise of the will. During an attack on the Hudiaara

drain, when the company commander had been wounded in the foot, he described how he rallied the men. "Follow me you devils, half starved on my right, everybody else behind me." His hard face had grinned at the recollection.

"Are the Gurkhas in position?", I asked Ajai, the troop commander.

"More so, Sir", he beamed on the wireless, "They would be masking the advance of my troops through the water". He was wheeling his tank into position with the other tanks to join up at the rendezvous slightly further up from the assembly of the infantry.

A thin crescent was rising in the sky. There was the run of the milky way, the chirp of the crickets and the cry of the owl. We sat like masked figures in line behind the troops guarding the canal banks. Charlie and Delta companies were ranged in front. Behind them were the other two companies with a sprinkling of battalion Headquarters. In between Jit was coming up now and then to find out how the fighting group was faring. He walked with the same baby lilt I had known six years ago. He was now the second-in-Command.

A slighter figure appeared carrying a stick. He was the Intelligence Officer arranging the companies in parallel lines. He gave a peremptory order to the company JCO. I interjected. With youthful exuberance he explained his reason. He said he had commanded the company for a few days. As a result his love for it was deep enough for him to give orders above my head. I quietened his verve by telling him that times had changed.

Then the rumble of guns firing above the waterline was heard. We had slowly begun to move up. Feet were shuffling. Moti, my orderly, came along and helped me put on

my great coat. The company lurched forward like a snake. Delta company kept abreast. Jit signalled the other companies to follow up. The Light Machine Guns on the nearer bank began their angry stutter. Lines of steel helmeted robots crested up to make good the distance between the forming up place and the bank.

The enemy replied with equal ferocity. His guns churned the dust around. Shells singed hysterically. Bikhat Rai, the Havildar Platoon Commander, for whose efficiency I had developed a great regard, ruthlessly prodded his men forward. Thak Bahadur, who had probably got his name from an ancestor who might have been a marksman, rolled top-like from side to side.

The rucksack on my back felt heavy. In the old days I would have put books inside, a few canvases and a blanket but now it was according to regulations. Perhaps it was heavier for that reason.

U . . . where was she now? Perhaps on a plane higher than the flanders fields she had talked about in the music shop. Clouds had gathered outside. We had been playing chopin that day. I had given her a recitation of poems. A picture was on it and girlishly she had alluded to a couplet that a picture alone could not be satisfying for memory . . . And yet how I still wish to see the fay-like form of my dearest distant cousin standing outside its poetic arbour to receive and revere. Clothed in white it had moved blithely, asked a fond question and I had said an au revoir. Flowers had smirched the background in red. It was too wintry for anything commonplace to be believed or said despite the later estrangement. Or were the authorities to be blamed for change in attitudes or was emotion a cleansing process, a necessary penance for expression. But as friends' honour stands indivisible. The emotional mix up was youthful ab-

normality but disloyalty is unpardonable. What a mischievous slip of a girl otherwise—and how lovable too! The mysterious intricacies of fate should endeavour to make us join hands in a venture—but for this courage would be needed....

We were nearing the bank. The crazy ring of bullets multiplied. The platoon set operator fell. I remember how he used to lisp on it. As drilled beforehand, the first wave neared the bank. On a signal to Ram Dutt, whose dissatisfaction with the wireless was punctuated by pahari invective, codeword 'Thak' was beamed on the set.

An awkward movement ensued. The snake uncoiled. In the moonlight, helmets flashed. Men began to jump down the embankments. The leading elements had ladders which were placed on the opposite side for the rest to climb. The clatter of guns from across the bank increased. Guns salvoed the red tingling flash flaming in the thin night air.

With a sub-machine gun clutched in my hand, I fell splashing into a pool of mud. Clambering across the water we made for the half dry course beyond the opposite bank. The rain of bullets thickened. Close to me I could hear the wail of a man who had fallen into the water. It felt useless to die, but living did not matter either. Men fought like a herd and died likewise with a few exceptions of luck or life-long misery. The signaller babbled something incoherent in the set before he fell too.

Somebody had placed a ladder across the other bank for me to climb up. The bunkers alongside had been destroyed. I threw a grenade into the smouldering ruin. The men charged too, spitting fire.

The earth was hot and smelling. Somebody shouted that the bank had been cleared. It was a signal for me to

give the final word for the assault through the half sown corn.

“Ram.....Ram”, I shouted long but his voice had been stilled. The verey light was fired. We braced ourselves for the final assault. There were to be no poppies. There was only the canal to be crossed, the wire breached and then the final word. The guns were already firing on the distant objective in the clephant grass across the corn-field.

Ajai's tanks were clanking their tracks, eager to support us. He was already imagining enemy tanks because the hits split the clephant grass. Something blew up. I heard his voice again, short, staccato and cracked. The last fifty yards were ultimate. Waves of steel helmeted men fell howling on their prey.....the objective, charge, reorganisation, a word on the set, and the verey light signal.

Tanks would soon be joining up. The night was quiet again, the moon hardly moved. The star studded track cribbed over and went across the Ichogil Canal into Lahore.

Lahore. When we were children we used to huddle in a train to go to college for a few months and then return to the hills. It was a girl's college, Queen Mary's called 'Shahu di gari parda school' by the locals, where we boys were admitted and kept upto a certain age before we got out of hand. Then off we went to the Chief's College having left no memories behind. Partition came and the pleasing fabric of life was disrupted....

The remaining companies had moved on to the sides. Casualties were being evacuated. They had to be carried all the way across the bridge the pioneers had constructed to the battalion dressing station. Blood and bullets were painful but they had to be endured. Somebody had told me in Jaiselmer that the uniforms we wore had to be respected but the cause was indeterminate.

“Sahib sab admi position me hain”, Subedar Adhikari came crawling upto me. He went on to tell me that Rai’s platoon had the maximum casualties. I asked him who had shown gallantry and he gave me a list of names.

Robots one, two, three, all deserving of death or heroism. The canal was long. Many more would have died, been maimed in the spitting mud before the cause was won. Freddi, the CO, would soon be coming to assess the damage. I moved from man to man. It was not essential to know names. They belonged to a set, a class. They were all alike. Thak Bahadur ding-donged from side to side as his father had done. His son, I hoped, would one day call a truce with time and do something else.

The night wore on. I felt a stifling pain rise up in my right leg. I had tripped against a flare that had charred my side and a limp developed. The second operator handed me a cane he carried as a prop despite the objections of the company Subedar. I was certain he gave an officer’s need of it as an excuse whenever he was ordered to throw it away.

We lay on the ground edged by the elephant grass, awaiting the arrival of companies which had to go through. It mattered so little. Death was obvious, painful and intensely dramatic to need description or testify to the misery. One had asked for his mother. Somebody had shouted “No use, No use. The Army is a life of penance.” But there is no substitute for pain or melancholy.

This was only the Rohi Nala, a rehearsal this side of the Ichogil Canal on the night before the 10th of January.

The brigade set caught the AIR news. President Ayub and Mr. Shastri had signed an agreement at Tashkent to call off hostilities. Troops of both sides were to pull back.

Neither side had won, but the armies had shown their ability to take the shock and hit back. It was honourable to call a truce, lick wounds and begin politicking again.

The following night we had a burra khana. A burra khana is a camp fire where men get drunk and eat heavily. They sing and mix freely with their officers. In the morning, the order groups moved up to the Ichogil Canal past 'Patton Nagar'.

Patton Nagar was a junkyard of blasted Pattons; an exhibit of the uselessness of sophisticated armour against superior tactics. To a degree poor handling by tank crews and limited fuel capacity had aggravated their debacle. But the showpiece was proof.

We were taking over from a Gurkha battalion. The companies were to arrive later. Placing ourselves with our appropriate numbers, the slow process of handing and taking over charge began. In the field this is based on understanding, not on a display of every pin. The dugouts were padded with earth and camouflaged, linked to one another by crawl trenches. The mess tent was in the open under trees. The flaps were unrolled and the net spread over it whenever the air threat was non-existent.

On the opposite side the Pakistanis were straggled in similar postures. The canal was muddy. Like a cleft, a broken wooden bridge fell into its unruffled surface. The Baluchis came up on the bank and threw up fruit. The Gurkhas looked up at them unmoved. They only obeyed orders to start or stop firing. Their humour was within themselves. Cranes flew overhead unmindful of the division of the armies and the play of reversed orders. Soon the dugouts would be filled up and the withdrawal begun. It was amusing to hear soldiers of either side telling each other across the Canal that it had been a politicians' war.

Two weeks later, while I was resting in my bunker on the Hudiarra drain near Burkee, I received summons from the CO to accompany him. We both moved out from the mess to a broken walled encampment in which the Brigade Headquarters was located.

The Brigadier received me. He said I wasn't too young to be influenced differently if I felt so strongly about leaving the Army, but I had had a bright career before me. He asked me again if I was sure and whether I had my father's consent. I nodded assent, though incorrectly about the latter. We shook hands—it felt good to be recommended for a final break up by a person worthy of being called a man and a soldier.

Although the sceptre had passed the conviction stayed. On republic day I came away on two months' leave. My father was lying on a cot when I entered the room. I touched his feet and told him I was on leave. He thought I was joking when I said I had put in my papers. Convictions built on suffering in the past are serious matter for future consideration which older men will not understand. It may be so because their impact will not be felt in theirs or may be even in our lifetime.

SIKKIM PANORAMA

SIKKIM PANORAMA

When war clouds moved dangerously along our northern borders in and people were inclined to panic, the little kingdom of Sikkim fretted the least. This was not due to complacency or indifference on the part of its people to what might have happened had the Chinese made the expected thrust into their state. On the contrary, few people are ingrained more with a traditional respect for their independence, as they understand it, than the Sikkimese. They seem to possess a cool and habituated confidence, which, being an attitude to life, has now become a necessary condition of their somewhat uninhibited ways. It is, therefore, nothing uncommon to find ordinary roadside workers flocking to the Denzong cinema, a new wonder for them at Gangtok, in order to bag the most expensive seats and later, in the evening, please some giggling hostess over bouts of spirit and roasted meat.

I remember talking on this point to an old acquaintance I had met in the Gangtok Bazar. The acquaintance had been with one on a trek in Western Sikkim two years ago. He was jovial, impetuous and humorous. He had a simple heart but was quick in seeing falsehood. Whenever he wanted to show that he was not the one who could be fooled, he would screw his slit eyes and nod his head. This time too he nodded his head and by way of a rejoinder to my question asked me what my reason was for the impression. Realising I had indiscreetly given his people offence and he hadn't quite liked it, I simply said I had gathered the impression from the readiness of the Sikkimese to laugh at anything or nothing at all. "They laugh because they are simple and are able to trust," he answered, moved. I did not

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fully comprehend the meaning of his words till I realised how peaceful and serene the ways of the beautiful kingdom were and how unimaginably rude a clash of arms there would be.

We moved with our strings of mules dangling the bells that hung around their necks. It is a thrilling sound, this sound of bells. It is reminiscent of rugged passes and knife-like crags, of tent-flaps flying in the dry wind and snow. It is a cherished sound for it is connected with the mountains where you feel free.

It is a Sunday morning. The sky is deep, blue and speckless. You muffle your head, warm your hands on a stove and move up to a point from where you can see the rocks and crags. In your heart there is a sensation of gratitude and joy. You can hardly explain it. It draws its sustenance from hundreds of little things and happenings around you.

You have fallen into a soliloquy of thought. It is very easy to be absorbed in it, when life is full of changing impressions. You mustn't waste time you tell yourself for it is the day of the Sunday market in Gangtok. Some shout for joy in anticipation. "Wa rey chorey" and "Ibkay Stuff" are overheard. There is someone sulky too. He grunts cynically. "Oh, damn, it! You will soon get fed up of your enthusiasm in a hell like this." You forget him because he is a cynic and likes to sleep.

The jeep careers pantingly along the road. It being slippery, skid chains are applied. Frozen ice in the morning is dangerous. The sapphire blue lake in the middle of the fir forest has a fog lifting lazily from its surface. There is a hunting lodge close to the lake. You have noted rhododendrons around it with particular interest. There would be a bloom of white and red flowers when spring comes.



*The Author and Major Muthana
at an outpost in Sikkim*



*The Author in the
Sikkim Himalayas*



*The Author with Sherpas Tashi and
Ang Temba, and Captain Sodhi, Gurkha Rifles*



*A Bagpiper rouses the
Fighting Fourth in Sikkim*

Gangtok, a lovely town, comes in view. You can see the houses, prim and petite, from a distance. There is the Residency, the Palace and the new Cantonment Lines perched on three different hills. Streams of flags, fluttering in the wind, attract your attention. There are strange ant-like writings traced neatly over their surface. You ask somebody on the road what they signify and he turns his head in meditation.

The drive leading up to the Palace is lined with pear trees in bloom. Their pink and white flowers drop softly on the metalled road. At the gates of the Palace can be seen the scarlet-uniformed guard with Shako-type head dress adorned by an unusually long plume. Groups of little rosy checked children pass by smiling at your camera. There are some exceedingly pretty faces who shy from the camera. So your resort to the old trick of pretending to focus on willing subjects with freshly parted and oiled hair whereas you catch the unsuspecting beauty unawares.

You now have come to the Gangtok bazar, a string of gabled houses lining a wide road. In appearance it resembles the bazar of any hill station in India. It is crowded with people from Gangtok and the adjoining areas. The Gangtok locals are quite modern. The boys wear jeans and cowboy hats, the girls elegant saris. They wear their hair bobbed. The rustics are sometimes more colourful. You will find a big thickset fellow wearing a chiffon shirt over his kiltlike handwoven skirt, a silk scarf and a hat rakishly inclined on his plaited hair. Say hello to him and he will show you a row of strong yellow teeth, stretch out his horny hand and reply 'thank you'.

The path leading to the Sunday market from the bazar is a cobbled one. Outside the walled arena sit those peddlars who have a reputation for 'rooking' people. Behind their

wares and untrustworthy faces is a romance, woven of imagination. Therefore, don't crush their lies as lies or else you shall never hear the grinning old woman, whose words I pretended to trust tell you that her wares, carved with the most unbelievably hideous dragons, had adorned the Potala Palace in Lhasa.

Stalls rigged up on Saturday night make up the Sunday market in Gangtok. A concourse of people go past the labyrinth of stalls with an air of festivity. It is a throng of the rich and poor and if you like to delve in problems of social relationship you will never discover any trace of embittered feelings between the two.

The Sikkimese like to decorate their stalls tastefully. You will find a whole family engaged in arranging their wares with painstaking precision. There are indigenous things and foreign things but in their hands they acquire an ancient mystery. Carved wallets, carpets, Kalimpong boots, jewellery and precious knick-knacks studded with stones and painted with flaming dragons are all rapidly sold out. The vegetable and orange market is a different scene altogether. There you find cows and goats lurking around. The business is more brisk.

As evening settles over Gangtok, you steer your jeep over the mountain range back to camp. The day is alive in your mind. As you drive along, you figure out what you would do on return to camp. You will change into warmer clothes and huddle into a tent. The moon would probably have set by then. But there would be a lingering shudder of light on the Kanchenjunga massif outlined against the sky. The stars would be gleaming over-head, suspended in the still air. In their light you will find your way to the warmth of your sleeping-bag and a day would be over.

IN THE LAND OF THE PHAROAHS



The Author being presented a Citation by the UAR Ambassador in India

IN THE LAND OF THE PHAROAHS

I sat back on the upholstered sofa in the air conditioned luxury of the club bar and puffed ponderously at a thumb like cigar. A while before I had driven down from the office with a figment of good news tucked guardedly beneath an ill disguised expression of casualness. The only other visitor in the bar at that time was an overblown man with a round, puckered face and lidded full moon eyes over which spread a dense forest of eyebrows. He was felling palm size club sandwiches with his yellow horse like teeth and swallowing them noisily with large gulps of beer from a tankard.

"Ridiculous sod", I mused looking at him with tickled contempt. The barman came around to ask me my drink. I questioned him about the man's identity. Like all barmen who know all men who frequent bars with a certain familiarity, either by name, face or misdemeanours, he blinked his eyes at my ignorance about one who was unquestionably as reputed outside the bar as in it. I wondered if I had missed him midstream.

The barman handed me my drink.

"Ah, Sir," he sighed deeply. "The man is a financial wizard."

"Financial, what?", I asked, stupefied by his knowledge of wizards.

"Wizard, Sir", he answered puzzled at my amazement. "He is the one famous for keeping the Government in check from running into debt. Brilliant man," started life pawning rubbish, now owns mills. Comes regularly to eat sandwiches and drink beer."

"And how does he top up the afternoons," I added making a gesture suggestive of a rock hurtling down a mountainside. The barman looked at me uncomprehendingly. He simply asserted the man's brilliance. He would have reeled of something more about him had not a grunt from the wizard summoned him. He hurried to the bar-shelf, wrenched open another bottle and poured it into his tankard, presumably for the greater glory of Indian finance.

I walked out of the bar as I had entered it, thinking over the good news that had chanced upon me. By an association of ideas it struck me that he had something to do with regard to making allowances for the Chief's trip to the United Arab Republic. For months it had been in the offing and we of the personal staff had kept our fingers crossed. Probably at the persistent behest of our hosts, the people concerned acceded. They realised that a touch of youth was needed to add lamplike charm to the functions of age and grace. I awaited the going with my head in the air and feet on Indian soil.

The Chief's Military Assistant, a staccato and machine-efficient official, dangled the choice to Opu and myself. It was easy to read his mind, "He who gets the porridge loses the pudding." He meant the European tour later in the year when the Chief was to go for the Imperial Defence Conference.

I was still uncertain in my mind whether to regard my position in the party as that of a tourist in uniform or as a mere official appendage who would be lucky to gather a few kaleidoscopic images of the land we were to visit. I attempted to glean through travel brochures which the UAR Embassy in India had sent us. Leafing through them, I was baffled by the soaring statistics of progress and the inevitable political colour wash such literature generally was. I turned

to the Encyclopaedia Britannica only to suffer the sad realisation that by the time I finished reading the relevant extracts, the visit would be over. I foresook all effort to be prepared. It seemed worthwhile to go along as an armchair tourist recording everything I saw in its true perspective.

A tour of this nature will undoubtedly fritter into a succession of official functions and parties if the host country does not imaginatively plan the itinerary. I experienced a foretaste of what I was to go through at a call on the UAR Ambassador prior to our departure.

A tall, elegant man, his eyes within narrow slits, shifting and missing nothing, greeted us. The Chief went inside. Having acquired a tacit instinct to understand whether the Chief would like his staff officers to accompany him to certain places, I decided that I had better stay out. Not knowing what to do with myself, I toyed with the idea of hanging my peak cap on a peg which wouldn't hold it. As I was happily engaged in what seemed a self-indulgent pastime, I sensed the Ambassador standing beside me and smiling at my decoy. Bowing reverently, which made me feel falsely elevated, he asked if I wouldn't like to come in. I was puzzled at the complete absence of military protocol. I said I preferred to be elsewhere if the Chief and he were to discuss matters of little concern to me. He nodded agreeably and asked me into another room. It was thickly carpeted and adorned with delicate Egyptian miniatures. In a corner was a radiogram which he switched on. Before he could assume that I was a mad devotee of the latest crazes, I thanked him for the trouble and said I would make myself comfortable. He did not, however, leave until a bartender had brought whisky. With trained elegance he poured us drinks. After a while the Ambassador made his exit. A perfect diplomat, I thought. But more than that I knew he was the representa-

tive of a people who combined charming affability with a winning warmth. It was easy to surmise that in their land a man in uniform is highly esteemed. Later, the General surprised me when he said that the Ambassador had been a General himself before his gifts at diplomacy were, perhaps, accidentally discovered.

At a colourful party given at his residence prior to our departure, we had a foretaste of the wines and hospitality to be met with later in Egypt. After dinner the guests moved into the garden where all joined to a dance. I danced with the Ambassador's wife. She was jovial. She kept on telling me that I would have the fun of my youth in the United Arab Republic. It was evident from her gaiety that her's was a verve which growing old never dulls.

Yellow fever and white Nile, typhus and the peppery doctors brandishing syringes and threatening injections. A moustachioed Colonel of peacetime Gaza fame sat talking like a veteran of the hazards of travel in the sand. I had a mischievous desire to drape him in Lawrence's garb and place toy camels and a metal vista of the desert on his table. There was the unnerving tedium of bank drafts and foreign exchange, passports and visa endorsements.

Farewells for being away for a week were needless. It would have been best on return merely to spring a surprise on friends about anecdotes they would unbelievably regard as creations of a masterful imagination. You would probably ask them to rack their slothful heads against the sixth volume of the Encyclopaedia if they asked you more than you could give them.

The aircraft whirled and droned. It was a Boeing flight to Bombay and beyond the seas. An air hostess who had flown us the previous year on the Chief's tour of the

northern borders with General Maxwell Taylor, greeted us again. A pang cribbed at my heart when, instead of the conventional 'namesteji', she gave me the frayed arched look of a few months back. I had replied her greeting with the joy of 'Hi' without other compliments. I sat in the aircraft next to Sunil Dutt whom I was to meet again at Juhu the following year.

As we taxied into Bombay, I could see the mute line of brass and drab hats waiting for the Chief. I was quite accustomed to the trappings of importance. A General or two and half a dozen Colonels were employed in the seemingly unimportant task of running to and fro.

"How many pieces?", "Where is the bedding?"; "Who has the passport?" No, but malaria precautions were necessary too. Alright, alright, you hissed between clenched teeth. Everything should sort itself out. And, surprisingly it did with a rueful feeling that a lot of fuss could have been avoided.

The plane taking us to Cairo was to leave in the early hours of the morning. The General and his wife were confined to the VIP room. We of the junior order were left in a large airconditioned lounge to face each other in a sleepy upright vigil. To myself was left the task of arranging the transshipment of valuables through the iron maze. I took up the task with immaculate skill.

Have you ever revelled in the pleasure of pricking the vain, deflating pomposity or simply enjoying a good joke? Well, if you haven't, just run along the Customs and say that you have gold stuck in your teeth. If they don't ask you to spit it out, you shall relish an animal satisfaction in winning a point against them. It was, however, enough for us to tell them that we were a military delegation.

The delegation besides the General and Mrs. Chaudhuri consisted of two brasses and two non-brasses. The brasses were General Batra from my old school and Brigadier Antia; the non-brasses, Colonel Sandhu and myself. We both belonged to the Chief's staff. On our return, I learnt from one of the representatives of the UAR Government that the wives of other members were also cordially invited, but in view of the overheads within the State, it wasn't thought expedient to take the trouble. My mind wandered to the financial wizard who might have raised his measly head in the settlement of the trip. Nevertheless, the acceptance of the idea would have been unfair to me.

The warning lights trembled uneasily. Over concealed loudspeakers, a heavy voice summoned all passengers scheduled for Cairo, Rome, London. I winkled myself free of the strangeness I experienced in really going out of the country. It was not the big eyed wonder of a stay at home dazed by the hallowed prospect of seeing the world but that I simply regarded myself with pardonable self-indulgence.

A year previously, while lying on the sands of Elliot's beach, I had watched the mournful spray come splashing to the point of my elbows and withdraw into the immense corridors of the blue beyond. Beyond the spray and surf were lands I had dreamt of in the quiet years of my childhood in Kangra. There was a map at home which my father would survey with the experienced eye of a traveller and say, "If you want to go where I have been, you got to trace it out first." Dreamily, I would look at blotches of brown denoting land masses spangled in the wide ocean that now lay sprawled before my gaze. There were the masts, the shimmering aloofness and the gay squeal of women and children running into the laughing spray. When we were children we had a curious way of expressing our likes for countries in

which we wanted to spend the rest of our days. Africa was hot, dark and damp, creening with hypos in sullen rivers and giraffes whose heads were so high they could reach up to the highest foliage. There were the pyramids and the Arabs in their flowing robes. Across the Atlantic was America, the new world. Because of its newness it held small charm except for the story of the Mayflower. Our choice invariably fell on Europe, the small cramped continent. Asia was too near home to think of with the far seeing eye of the romantic. At fifteen the ways of the grown-ups were so queer that we wondered what it would be like at twenty-five. Yes, soon we would be flying over the ocean.

Soft music floated in the cavernous sphere of the Boeing. We had to go through the routine process of fixing a safety belt. A Sirocco like heaviness hung in the air. In the division of classes, the General officers were given the luxury of first class travel whereas we were hamstrung in the crowded economy class. A slav, probably Czech, sat near me. His strong eye scanned the minutia of a technical formula. Each time he turned a page, a frown crossed his face asserting the impossibility of a new invention.

While I was watching him, the air hostess came around taking orders for drinks. Keeping his eye glued on the paper, the Slav murmured "A champagne for me please and a double dod for my friend here." He referred to a stodgy man wearing a look of menacing frustration on his face. The girl blinked in confusion—"Double, What, Sir?", She queried. "Oh, the Scottish corruption", he said, immensely satisfied with what he thought was a humorous description. His friend eyed him with a look of striking disapproval.

Having written the orders in a small note book, bearing on its cover the sleepy Air India Maharaja, she turned to me. In a moment of hesitation she wondered if I would

really want a drink, then for politeness sake she asked me without descending to the level of addressing me as 'Sir'. She felt inclined not to address somebody her own age so reverently. I did not want a drink but by way of establishing a communication I ordered a beer. My ego recoiled somewhat for until then I had been answering admiring looks of two American girls in the row of seats on the left with the detached benevolence of a tiger shooting Maharaja on his way to the gaming tables of Monte Carlo.

The Slav and his friend drank champagne with inelegant relish. The friend smacked his tongue and rolled his lips against each other to drain the last taste that might have remained. I relaxed back comfortably, sipped my beer and reminisced.

"When you arrive in Cairo, you should see the beauties of the world—the wide Nile and palm trees. There would be Alexandria washed by the cobalt blue Mediterranean with strings of camels in the brown baked gold of the desert." These descriptions reached out to me from the reception at the UAR Embassy.

A light was switched on above my head. I angrily turned towards the Slav who was also beginning to smart under the glare. Suddenly it was put out. Before I could drop into a half hazy sleep, I heard a soft whisper in my ear.

"Just three and six would do, please", I shook myself up with a jerk to see the smiling face of the hostess stuck close to my ear.

"Sorry to disturb you. But the beer was only three and six, please."

"I thought it was on the house", I said, sorely conscious of giving rein to my true reaction though the reason why I had not ordered champagne was for a contingency like this

one. She grimaced, then pointed towards the redoubtable Military Assistant who was basically reserved about finances.

The landing lights wiggled. A soft voice announced the approach of the plane near Cairo in three languages. I made an attempt to follow what was being said in German though the difficulty in doing so was an added self reproach for neglecting my studies. But that was in India, another country, and we were in African skies. Somewhere below, the Nile scaled the land like an ancient leviathan.

I shook myself free from my reverie to remember that we had to land in service dress. I hurried to change in the toilet. As I was entering, I saw a little girl following me. She was obviously in a hurry and I was in no position to act gallant. So I shut myself in. When I opened the door, a horrified expression crossed her face. "Oh, the Gestapo", she cried. I naturally wondered what on earth she meant by it and to my dismay I realised that life was not that simple. It had faltered.

We arrived at Cairo International Airport in the early hours of the morning. The ramp was pushed up to the plane while the party was preparing to move out. I said a hurried goodbye to the hostess who had angered me in my slumber the previous night.

"Well, I do hope to see you somewhere", I said.

"It may be in Cairo only", she answered laughingly. The matter of fact tone implied she cared neither way. When I was about to descend the ramp, I ungraciously remembered a cartoon which showed a man hurrying to an air hostess and saying, "Before you get out of my life for ever, will you please give me a frown."

A host of brass hats stood awaiting us. The Chief

shook hands and disappeared in the milieu. My eye caught the most important man in the crowd. He was General Aly Aly Amar, the Chief of the UAR. Slight and dapper, he was visibly stunted by a few tall and magnificently proportioned officers. But he had a way about him which made others respond to the meanest gesture he made.

An Egyptian Major, appointed to assist in my task of taking care of all effects, came up to me. He said something in French. I replied him in German. Placing a friendly hand on my shoulder, he said continental rivalries should not be brought on African soil. We began to speak the language of ex-colonials.

The luggage was shifted out by red beret military policemen. We occupied a runway vehicle to go to the lounge where the party was split and being entertained according to order of rank.

Originally it was planned for us to stay at the Nile Hilton but owing to change of plan, accommodation had been arranged at the Sheppards. Both these hotels overlook the Nile and the tower built after the revolution. It is pleasant to hear Egyptians divide their national history in two distinct phases. Everything bad and decadent existed and happened before the revolution. After it even the fish in the river tasted better. The idea is naive but it is honest and right. Nasser's image has worked a miracle in people's mind. It marks the real and resurgent, a happy reminder that a historic character must emerge at a crucial time in a nation's life.

While I am on the point of the personality cult, I would like to give a brief idea of my impressions of certain other dignitaries I have had the good fortune to meet. In Mr. Bulganin and Mr. Khrushchev visited the National Defence Academy at Kharakvasla.

Among other programmes, a horse show was arranged for them. One of the items was a musical ride in which a number of us took part. After the show, Mr. Bulganin came around to congratulate us. On seeing us in blue patrol jackets, the decadent nostalgia of the Czarist times became evident in him. Suddenly Mr. Khrushchev appeared. He patted the horses and cadets jovially, cracked jokes, giving everyone the impression that he had witnessed a remarkable show.

Mr. Chou-en-lai and a military delegation came to Kharakvasla for our passing out parade in . After the parade, there was a guest night in the cadets mess. I was the second senior appointment of the Passing Out Course. Consequently I sat next to a Marshal of the Chinese Army opposite Mr. Chou-en-lai. I had occasion to study him closely. He spoke rarely, but everything he heard or saw registered itself on his mobile face. It was safe to think that the head of a powerful state used to play women's roles for the Chinese theatre in his youthful days.

The Marshal on the other hand was a suave militarist. Each time his wine glass was filled up, he raised it, turned to me and said, "Ay friend, a thousand years of friendship." Within a few years I was sitting on a bleak pass overlooking the Chumbi valley to ward off the Chinese. I couldn't help thinking of that Marshal and his thousand years.

It was a pleasure to have Marshal Zhukov at the Indian Military Academy. Looking at him one felt sure to be face to face with a tough man and a Blimp like soldier. At that time we were naturally impressed to be spoken to by a person who probably commanded the largest body of men in the Second World War. But he touched our hearts by descending to our level. At Kharakvasla, I hear, he was taken to a

rehearsed demonstration. It was obvious there could be no flaws in it. At the conclusion of the demonstration, Zhukov went up to a cadet and stood behind his creased and box like pack.

"What is in it", he asked.

"Contents of the pack", replied the unmoved cadet.

"You are right", said Zhukov, "open it up".

"You are right too, Sir", replied the caught out but witty cadet.

The pack contained dirty linen. They both shook hands as equals.

The most remarkable Indian we all know or have had the privilege to meet is Mr. Nehru. He bustled across the scene like a colossus. I first had the chance of seeing him at a function at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling. We were to receive our ice axes for a basic course done at the institute. Panditji sat absent-mindedly before giving away the awards. His eye roved above the birches and then returned to the ropes and climbing silhouettes on the walls. A far seeing visionary and an artist, he looked a man depressed by the present. I cannot think of his dissatisfaction without a canker. For anybody who aspires to be great with a cause to eschew, the past is an inspiration, the present a malaise and the future a dream. Enough said, the woods will remain dark and deep and lovely for ever....

The next morning when I awoke, I went out in the aisle to look at the Nile. A mist was rising from the river and the first cries of the muzzein were heard. Otherwise the city lay calm with a car running along the main boulevard.

I returned to my room, switched on a geyser and lay back on my cot. A pedestal lamp had three figures carved

on the metal. One showed a woman figure, another a western style waiter and the third an Egyptian with a fez. Instinctly I pressed the right button. Pressed between bed sheets, I was mystified when an Amazonian stood before me asking for my laundry. The next time I was more careful with my inclinations.

Our itinerary could roughly be divided into visits to the military establishments, the monuments and gleaning of general impressions of the people. Our evening haunts were the night clubs. The military establishments we went to were a number of training schools, factories and a rocket centre somewhere in the desert. The monuments were the pyramids, the museum and an assortment of broken down temples and ruins. There was besides the magnificent Son-et-Lumiere at the Pyramids.

At Alexandria we went to Montazah, the luxurious palace of King Farouk. At Port Said we ventured into the Suez Canal after its functioning had been explained to us by the minister incharge for its running. At Aswan we saw the dam, the second cataract and on our way back the ruins of Luxor.

The drive into the Cavalry school was marked by colourfully attired sowars standing upright with lances in their hands. Tanks used in the UAR Army were displayed; they were Russian and British. While we were engaged in witnessing the effects, a class was being run close by. Apparently, it was being run for effect, because as soon as our backs turned, the officers being instructed looked up at us with curiosity—only to turn their eyes to their fiery teacher again at the slightest movement towards them. Something so akin to what we too would do here.

A parade organised at the Military Academy was as

youthfully ebullient and precise as here in India. The difference lay in more patriotic ardour expressed in timed shoutings as the cadets passed the saluting base.

The visit to the Artillery School, the Air and the Naval Headquarters was a routine of exchange of pleasantries, champagne and an appreciation of each other's efforts in limited spheres. The factories were productive and highly organised. Everything seemed to be geared for the progress of the Arab world and the slow dissemination of Israel.

The most interesting demonstration we saw was that of a ground to air rocket. We had been taken in a Russian helicopter to a restricted area in the desert. Arab officers and soldiers in desert caps were engaged near a directional vehicle close to a shamiana under which sat the brass hats of the UAR Army. After we had taken our seats, a signal was given and soon an aircraft appeared on the horizon. It neared and parachuted a dummy in the air before veering off itself. A rocket was fired from the ground. Suddenly a tense exclamation was heard from the Egyptian officers who looked at the rocket in dismay. Instead of going towards the target, the rocket appeared to be going diagonally. Then before they could relapse into apologies and embarrassment, it turned and deftly blew up the dummy. There was an applause at the missile joke.

The banquets given in our honour were as sumptuous, the wines as varied and tasty as Egyptian cheer and good manners. I was overjoyed to find a complete lack of crabbing protocol without loss of courtesy. At a particular banquet, I think it was in Alexandria, as the meals were served, the chief host began to relish it straightaway. The General was perplexed since the others hadn't yet been served. After a while the Arab turned to the Général and asked him more

than politely if the food in his plate wasn't getting cold. It was but.....Why don't you try that oily steak, mon General?

I shall return to the beaches of Alexandria and Montazah again. Our visit was too fleeting and in time too unjust. I would again want to see the treasures of the palace of Farouk whose riches and love of luxury was a compound of all the Maharajas of this country put together. And the boat ride with Fekry Mohsen, the glamorous Lieutenant, without any particular job in Army Headquarters. He had a girl, he said, he would bring for a dance in the night club at Sheppards. We had found some others and jived the evening long.....And the present he gave me as a token of our visit to Cairo is still with me. On a moonlit night we went to Sahara City, a night club close to the pyramids. The belle dancers, after a solo and group performance, joined up with the diners. General Batra and Brig. Antia had retired earlier since it was thought proper for older men not to be involved in the libertine pleasures of the young. Fekry and I returning warded off the intoxication by a stream of cool air through the car deflectors and the relieving haunt of El Khaltum's songs.

The drift at the Oberg the following night was, tempered by an enjoyable incident. The Military Attache of the UAR Army in India was present in Cairo at the time of Chief's visit. He was pleasantly round faced and jovial. It fell to his lot to take me to the Oberg along with Fekry Mohsen and two young students of Cairo university. We talked of the courses open to an Indian at the university. A short while later a Squadron Leader joined us. He had been strafing rebels in Yemen, and had just returned for what he described as a man's recouping. After a show by a French group from the Follies de Bergare, the belle dancer began

her twisting snakelike performance. She came to the edge of the stage, the Squadron Leader waved. She saw him and stopped dancing. She came up to him with her eyes streaming with laughter and excitement. He responded with intoxicated pleasure. They blabbered something in Arabic. The audience began to clap with annoyance and admiration. She returned to dance and the Squadron Leader turned to me.

"Life is short, Captain", he began, "It is only these little freaks that count."

"Your acquaintance is large", I replied for the sake of saying something.

"That is what I was implying", he laughed. "Yesterday I was flying over bedrocks. Today she laughs with me. Tomorrow....?"

As I awoke lazily and peered through the gauze curtains at the Nile, I thought of the Squadron Leader out in his jet. Somehow a craving for the freedom of drifting as in a haze overcame me too. From the skies to the boudoir, from something active, manly and dangerous to the bliss of ease and poetry. The presents had to be packed, the woman who had been asking for one to be appeased with the promise of another one.

Aswan is a township flung out at the other extreme of Egypt towards Nubia, below the Second Cataract. It has a hotel overlooking the Nile and fringes of palms and broken up islands. There was a night club and an exotic repetition of the Cairo repertoire.

At the dam, an engineer guide informed us about our whereabouts over a blower. We saw workmen in steel helmets engaged in the herculean task of putting up embrasures. We were told these were the modern pyramids of Egypt;

the slaves of yesterday were the inspired workers of the Republic of today. The slaves worked for attracting tourists, the freemen for green pastures.

More parties, lectures, the blissful colonnades at Luxor, the deathlike silence of mummies in their golden sleep. At one of the temples, a despot had even listed the things he wanted after death. His remarkable love for detail was evident in the decimal precision of his requirements. It only floundered in respect of one item—Wine, he had stated with unequivocal emphasis, was to be kept in unlimited quantity. Almost everything was intact except the basic and last requirement. The ancient dead told no tales, but they certainly were connoisseurs.

The interplay of light and voice on the deadened friezes and the sphinx of the pyramids of Gizeh has left an imperishable impression on my mind. From pearl grey to turquoise, blowsy red on the stone to its natural drabness was a subtle and poetic spectacle.

Before we left the United Arab Republic, we paid courtesy calls on President Nasser and the Vice President, Field Marshal Amer. Field Marshal Amer is a soft spoken man who is young enough to pass off for a senior Brigadier. Mr. Nasser is, however, a combination of a strongman and a visionary. While the President and the General were engaged in making pleasant conversation, I was happily watching a joyous gleam arising in the President's eyes as they fell upon a painting behind us of a boy and a girl.

I think it was Field Marshal Amer who asked the Chief if he knew General Musa.

"Oh, yes", remarked the General, "He was my student at the Staff College. So, I know whatever move he makes, I must have taught him that."

To this story the President related an even better one.

After the revolution he went to Port Said. There were three cells, having in them a prisoner each. He asked the first prisoner why he was there?

"Oh, I stood for President Neguib."

He went to the second one and asked him the same question.

"I opposed President Neguib".

So he went to the third prisoner and asked him.

"I am President Neguib", was the chilling reply.

On the way back to India, we stopped in Gaza with a battalion of the Dogras which was policing the desert to keep peace between Israel and the UAR. We had parted company with the Arabs at El Arish. There were hand clasps and never to part embraces.

Individual posts of the battalions were strung parallel to a road along which the line of division ran. They were in tin huts with the assortment of cook houses and volley-ball grounds. The Battalion Headquarters was further back in which was housed the Regimental Mess and called "The Tiger's Den". A former actress was engaged in looking after the decor and supplying the much wanted need to have a woman about. The officers' range of interest was only limited to a number of secretaries attached for shorthand and typing.

At the Customs in Bombay, the gifts we had received in the UAR had to be cleared for their value. There was the endless relay of salutes and tasks. On return to the Capital, I found the city smaller. There would be the same polo playing crowd watching or chasing balls, the same interests, the fetid air and occasional trips to different cities of the country.

As a supreme finale, there was the presentation at the UAR Embassy of the Grand Cordon to the General and a lower order to myself. Henceforth, we certainly could deem ourselves to be ambassadors without credentials to the Arab world.

SHORT STORIES

GHANSHYAM SUNDRA

GHANSHYAM SUNDRA

My last day in Dehra Dun was a dismal one. It had rained in the morning and by afternoon an oppressive fog hung all over. The long drive from Prem Nagar to the railway station had been cheerless and sad. A feeling of pride and regret weighed on me. I was proud of what I had achieved, whereas I imputed my melancholy to my leaving the Doon valley. And as emotion made me self-conscious, I eagerly sought the privacy of the carriage. Having taken stock of my belongings, I placed myself at the window where few could see me.

A while before the train was due to leave, Ghanshyam had come to the platform. He looked mature in his new uniform. His forehead was marked with an elongated tilak his mother had applied after the great ceremony.

With a limping gait, he strode on the platform in some meaningless hurry he was always in. Making animated gestures, he asked something of an officer who from a grave and responsible benevolence in his manner might have belonged to the staff. While the staff officer patiently settled himself to reply, Ghanshyam impetuously looked over his bald pate and smiled. I knew that something had happened for without a smile much that was in his heart never came out. Suddenly, turning away, he went in the direction of two officers who were coming in from the entrance. They belonged to his province and had been commissioned with him.

An unpleasant scowl darkened the brow of the staff officer. To be left without ceremony was horrifying but to be left thus was downright impudence. He decided that

this affront was too serious to escape its punishment. But as it was in his nature to be kind, he did easily forgive. Still it was not difficult to discern the wisdom with which he took measure of Ghanshyam's impropriety. The damned worm has turned, it seems to say.

The Guard signalled and the train moved with a jolt. The two officers embraced Ghanshyam and stepped into their carriage. I saw that he was embarrassed. He seemed to be in conflict whether he ought to raise his hand and wave out to his friends. But knowing that so far he had been lively it might look stupid to be mournful now. So he flung his hand and waved his farewell.

My carriage neared him. Because he had not noticed me, I had meant to surprise him with a conventional 'well, old chap, so long'. But when he was close, I could not bring myself to utter these words. They were unjust and untrue. A smile merely came over my lips and I was aware that it had the unnatural composure of supreme self-deceit. I could not have known his feelings for his face was shrouded in some deep thought. I only felt his gaze intent upon me. His eyes followed the widening space between us till a solitary goods wagon, standing on the parallel, line obstructed him from sight. When I tried to look back, he was gone. I stood at the doorway of my carriage. The dimming landscape of Dehra Doon looked weird. The familiar sights gradually dropped into some remote darkness and hurriedly as the evening, the night came on.

Through the fog, a dull moon illuminated the lonely earth. A damp, vaporous mist arising from the ground gave the night a dreamy morbid look. Thoughts of the past filled me. Each happening, however trivial, sparked through the mind and tried to break out into some meaningless outburst. . . . The memory of long walks with S—along the Tons,

the rides through the dusky tea gardens and the unbroken quietness of the evenings at the Italian cemetery. . . . Then like the groans of a famished beast, the agony of frustrated ambition took hold of me. What if I had won? I would have been famous. People would have nudged one another in meaning recognition and pointed towards me. I would pretend not to have seen them. Yet I would have tried to look modest though distinct.

But because I had not won, the petty consolations came to my ears. The reasons for having failed to achieve what then seemed to be the highest in life rehearsed themselves in my mind. And then from some obscure haunt I saw him who had insulted me a year ago and still owed me vengeance. And for that reason I felt ashamed.

For a long time I could not sleep. My attention had been diverted by a sleeping figure who lay on the next berth. His head was turned towards the ghostly night light and his face was expressionless. If it was not for the rhythmic snore that thrust itself out from his nostrils and half parted lips, he might have been taken for dead. I had read somewhere that a sleeping face reveals its genealogy. It might have been because of the hideous snore on that ghostly face, but somehow I concluded that the man had long been possessed of an arrogant stability.

I was absorbed in watching him when of a sudden he opened his eyes and looked straight at me. I thought he was pleased with himself in having caught me red-handed and for a moment I wished his content. I felt guilty and avoided his pointed gaze. I heard him snap at something with a grunt of aversion. The next minute he was wrapped in his double padded quilt and a smothered snore had begun. He had obviously realised how foolish he was to suppose that

anyone could ever harm his good fortune. That my presence was of no consequence could not be more clear.

I had now abandoned the idea of sleep. At one of the wayside stations I took some tea in a 'Kullar' for there is little better company than solitude and tea. Wrapping myself in a blanket, I placed my cheek on the window pane and looked out of the speeding train. The tea burned the tongue and with each sip, the subdued enjoined to burst. It was always the past crowding in its quest for the unattainable.

I did not know Ghanshyam in my early days at the Academy. He was spoken of as being childish and admired for his abrupt manners. I had only met him three months ago when he returned from hospital, where he was said to have recovered from a serious illness. He was not childish but I became conscious of a queer diffidence in him. It might have been what is called 'a way' that has its grace, yet that which is considered undesirable. To this his liveliness provided an artificial contrast and concealed his true nature in a fake light. Stories often went around. I did not believe them. They were, however, persistent enough. I did nothing to force my conviction because I considered myself to be nobody to judge others if their conduct did not upset the regularity of functions I was responsible for, I shut my mind to these stories and an unpleasant chapter was indefinitely closed.

In October we had gone out for manoeuvres to the hills which bordered the Yamuna. Here the river is still pure. After a cumbrous routine of patrolling, digging and route marches, I would slip away to the river and watch the sun go down behind the Shivaliks. I would sit there till the moon, risen after the sunset, had waned on a craggy hilltop and left a dim colouring in the sky.

On my return I invariably found myself on sentry duty. My companion on these duties was an honest and generous person who also came from his province. He had a deep stirring voice and when asked to sing, would never refuse. Each morning he would sing me 'Vaishnav Jan Ko' and the day never lost heart.

With infectious hurrahs and stifled yawns, sleep laden faces would emerge from the bivouacs. It meant that a night was over, a new day was come and the Yamuna flowed undisturbed.

His physical disability had forced Ghanshyam to attend the manoeuvres in the capacity of a supervisor. It was a post that involved no work and, therefore, he tried to find work. At times he came to me in pursuance of some duty but once it was over, he would quietly go away for we had little to talk about. There was a general belief that he and I bore a dissension. I took no steps to disprove it.

One day we reached a thick jungle where we were to harbour for the night. It opened on to a path lined on both sides with lime trees which sloped down a bend into a clear stream. Tea was served, bivouacs pitched, sentries went to their posts and soon the rest, tired after the hard day, fell into a happy, healthy sleep. I picked up my towel and went towards the stream. The idea of going to sleep so early did not appeal to me.

The woods were aglow in the light of the setting sun. A solitary cadet was returning from the stream. I recognised him. He was C. . . ., the acknowledged ragamuffin whose habit was to bully in sport and feed his animal spirits on intrigue. Knowing that a peculiarity of his kind is to bunch together, I was surprised to see him alone. Before I could ask him as to where the flock had perished, he bellowed in a gruff drawl.

"Ah in time", he said without his customary 'My boy' which meant that he was in a mood to be spiteful.

Not to encourage him, I asked him in a serious voice what it was that he wanted. A menacing gleam sparkled in his small eyes.

"Ay my", he muttered as though he was offended. "There he sits and you ask me what the matter is?"

I instantly knew who and what he meant.

Having been accustomed to his bantering tone of ridicule, I had long regarded him as a harmless little villain. But now seeing him with his lips parted in an ugly grin and his face beaming with vulgar delight, I came to realise how low he was. A strange sensation seized me. I wanted to tear at him but I failed to utter a word. My lips merely framed a curse. 'The devil', I said, within.

The sun had set. A faint smell of pines wafted in the air. On a tree nearby, a group of birds screeched in flight. As though in secret, the breeze stirred the nearer pines and then seemed to pass over them in some restless and agonised abandon.

I did not remember how long I had stood there, when suddenly I became aware of somebody's presence. A voice spoke but I heard nothing. Turning round, I ran through the woods and flinging myself on the coarse blankets, I dropped into a dreamless sleep.

We returned from the manoeuvres and time passed in barren routine. I was conscious of my changed feelings towards Ghanshyam. What might have seemed vulgarity now took the form of a child's innocence cruelly beguiled and misshapen. He was like a sensitive young boy who, being rudely treated, suffers in secret for fear that some malicious

person might not hurt him more. In him was an anguish that has its place in the sufferer's innermost thought but being ashamed to admit its presence, even to himself, he assiduously tried to abnegate. His outward cheerfulness is like a pitiable garb seeking to hide a naked blemish.

Three weeks were left for us to be commissioned. Those days were devoted to rehearsals for the final parade. I had got myself excused from the morning parades. With my mornings free, I loved to sit in the verandah in front of my room and watch the sun appear from behind the redbrick houses. On my lap an open book would lie unread. I would notice Ghanshyam go across the road, which ran close to our barracks, for his daily wash. He did not attend the outdoor parades because it was considered essential for his frail health to recover in as much ease as could be provided. Without qualms, he often exaggerated this liberal condition to serve his comfort. Yet it would never occur to him that it was morally wrong. On the contrary he drew a mischievous pleasure that comes of deft play in a strenuous game. And because he thought he was clever enough to be able to wrong a rule, it made his actions seem all the more childlike and trusting.

When I looked at him, he was, I felt, aware of my gaze and at times would return it with a sudden glance, but being abashed of a wordless confusion, blush and look down. His weakness lay in his weakness to blush.

His feelings towards me were constrained. He would look at me as if I had puzzled him. He did not seem to understand me and, therefore, had reason to believe that we could never be friends. Yet, in some way, he appeared to be grateful and would make it evident by a shy, trusting smile.

One night there was a dance. It was one of those

regular socials arranged by a sports club in recognition of its own achievements. This dance was somewhat distinct from the rest for it had been given by the equestrians—a class which breaks itself in the never fading 'cavalry spirit'. With them as always, it was an evening gay and lustrous.

In those days I suffered from the iniquitous habit of trying to assume a detached poise in an attempt to hide my embarrassing shyness. But from such a position, I took a frivolous pleasure in viewing life's innocuous absurdities and idle pretentiousness. The cavaliers, for instance, moved about with their glasses brimming with orange crush held in a way that you might suppose they were sipping whisky or that in their attempt to imitate their officers and stand on one leg, the ill-fitting patrol trousers seemed to give way at the seams.

Ghanshyam was there too. He was present not because he was a rider, in fact he never rode, but that he considered he must have his share of the general gaiety. Consequently, he had managed to have himself invited.

He was enjoying himself immensely. He danced with enthusiasm and shepherded his partner as though she was about to run away. I could not suppress a smile when he would lose his step, tread on his toes and look around to see if anyone had noticed him. He was conscious of some unseen, mocking power more than the discomfiture of his poor lady. He met my gaze of tender amusement with a timid look of apology as though I was conducting a dancing lesson for him. I did not look at him again.

It was long past the midnight hour but it seemed that the dance would never end. It is incredibly funny how time, on such occasions, is neglected with mysterious indifference. I was far from bored but I wanted to go out and breathe

fresh air. I found an opportunity to slip away and decided to go for a walk on the road which runs through the golf course.

It was the last moon that moved shyly behind little cloudlets. The road was bare and wintry. When I had fallen into an easy tread and seemed to enjoy my walk, I thought of home. On the night of the last moon, I remembered, we used to offer prayers at the little temple beyond the cornfields and then bathe in the moonlit waters till the dawn crimsoned the east. Being an auspicious night, I pleased myself with memories of my boyhood years for a long time.

It was quite late when I returned to my barrack. Suddenly I was seized with a craving to go towards his room, just to know that the object of my compassion was cloistered from a world it did not understand. I strolled towards his room but a queer feeling overcame me. I shivered within... I did not know why but filled with self-indignation, I turned back. I could betray myself but I shuddered to betray the innocence I pitied.

I lay in bed. My heart swum in feverish delirium. I wanted to pray, to consecrate my thoughts to Him who gave me the strength to be pure and good. Confused words came to my tongue.....I understand him.....I will tell him.....He is good, noble, wronged.....

I was awakened by a sparrow which lived behind my almirah. The door and the windows had been left closed at night. In her eager desire to fly out, it pitilessly beat its wings against the window pane. I opened the window and it flew out.

For a long time, I lay in bed. A sweet numbness had spread over my limbs and I felt happy of an incurable abundance of youthful energy.

Outside, behind the red brick houses, the dawn had spread. I rose and went towards his door. The agony of the night had been so trivial that a confession seemed simple. Gently I tapped. No reply. I called out his name but no one answered. Thinking he was still asleep, I noiselessly pushed the heavy door and stood inside.

He was sitting up, resting his head against the pillow. A faint perfume of incense filled the room. His eyes were closed and effortlessly he sang a song. He was so deeply lost in its music that my presence did not disturb him.

His song was in worship of the moon. It sang of the beautiful night which sets the dew sparkling on tender buds, freshens the earth and keeps it pure. It spoke of the simple faith that has for ages kept the great mystery boundless and free.

His face was no longer of him whom I had come to confess. It shone with a delicacy too tender for suffering. It seemed a sin to disturb him in his devotion and tell him my trivial story.

A sound of rhythmic rattling, the chill of glass on the cheek, the feverish haste around woke me. I raised my head and opened my eyes. The man on the next berth had long been up. He was dressed and had packed his belongings. A newspaper stretched between his fleshy hands. He seemed to pursue some column with deep intent. At intervals he would peer out of the window, look at his watch and seemed to fall into some mental calculation. It was evident from his uneasiness that he eagerly awaited his destination. A busy man, one thought. A philistine.

From out of an endless plain, the sun arose. I could see the waters of the Yamuna, slow moving and grey, so different from the little laughing river I had known in the mountains

at Dehra. Across the bridge lay the great city of Delhi. Then before it became too late, I rose, hurriedly changed, rolled my valise and waited.

On a cold December morning, the Mussorie Express pulled up at Delhi and out of a first class carriage, a young officer of the Indian Army stepped out.

MEMORIES OF A MUSK DEER SHOOT

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In March last year, snow lay thick on the ski slopes of Gulmarg. It also covered the roofs of the tiny wooden huts dotting the meadow among which, at the farther end, stood our ski school. In summer the site of the ski school marked the culmination of a tricky golfing hazard and was consequently looked upon by Jaswant, who entertained considerable pretensions on the subject, with sharp distaste.

Jaswant was almost five-feet-eleven, domineering, bohemian and in his slow and assured manner a perfect representative of the richly decadent past. As a sequel to his upbringing and unlike the rest of us, he showed a marked aptitude for easy and expensive sport. But what he excelled in most was shikar. His knowledge of guns and the ease with which he dispensed judgement on their muzzle velocity, range, lethal zone etc. stunted one's pretensions if they had been nourished in his presence. Therefore, when one evening he suggested that we go out shooting musk deer, I was more bewildered by his having condescended to invite me than by my secret knowledge of being able to shoot straight. Nevertheless, I accepted the invitation joyfully.

On the following Sunday, unpunctually at a little after seven, we set out for the shoot. Snow was falling in light flurries. It crunched and yielded beneath our heavy snow boots. But we plodded on with the fanatical earnestness of high altitude yogis to whom their Himalayan star had beckoned.

The musk deer tryst was not far from the meadows. Deer could be found in any part of the coniferladen ridge ringing Gulmarg, provided luck favoured the sportsman.

Musk deer is a slight, delicate animal with proverbial melting eyes. It resembles the ordinary species in unmolested surroundings. It is a delightful sight to watch. The male carries musk in its underbelly but the female bears none. Larger and lighter in colour, the male presents a more striking and dignified appearance.

Jaswant was in the lead. His face was half covered by a wide-brimmed old felt. A tuft of plumage jerked sprightly from the outer folds of his hat. His face wore a tense and relaxed expression as if his attention was focussed undividedly on the game. I watched the serious look and began to wonder, a little unknowledgeably perhaps, at the peculiar ethics of the sport. But knowing the cliché about a little knowledge, I felt incompetent to question.

I stomped behind Jaswant while Mohammed Zaman trailed behind me with the free lilt of a hillman. He carried his gun across the crook of his arm and pricked his head at intervals, expecting something miraculous to happen beyond the comical expanse of Jaswant's old felt hat.

Mohammed Zaman was a Kashmiri. Since he enjoyed local eminence as a shikari, the Commandant of the school had agreed to employ him as Jaswant's bearer in the hope that his mess would not be deficient in the supply of meat during the winter months. He was taking us out for the first time and was quite understandably conscious of the proof he had to give of his reputation.

We began to climb up a conifer-choked forest. As we ascended, we discerned columns of smoke arising out of the chimneys in our school. The forest was dark. Conifers sighed remorsefully and the snow beneath our feet lay variegated by ochre and green conifer needles. A truculent wind rose sometimes and chilled the marrow.

The forbidding aspect of our surroundings was lightened by a ski-trail which jinked its way upwards. It lasted only for a few yards, then traversed and fell sharply into a gully leading back to the meadow. We were quite on our own. It filled us with tingling suspense to realise that we were treading snow at a place where no man had been for months.

We had scarcely climbed higher when a muted groan awakened us from our self-absorbed musings. It sounded petulant and exasperated. Branches cracked and I imagined a huge brown bear hidden within them. I saw Mohammed Zaman grow tense—he certainly was not taking chances. After all his 'iman' as a shikar was at stake.

Suddenly the branches broke. Two Kashmiris with merry and cold-chilled faces came glissading out. Their embroidered skull caps shone with multi-coloured glass beads. First they jabbered in their shrieking dialect with Mohammed Zaman and then one of them approached Jaswant with a timid, apologetic look. In quick spurts he explained how they had come to learn our shoot and being fired with an overweening desire to be of service had decided to volunteer without hope of reward, and that it was a miserably cold morning to stir out, and that.....

Jaswant interrupted him abruptly. His reason was more than satisfying and we would surely take them with us. In return for their services, Jaswant's eyes tacitly promised them a few pounds of the game's flesh.

The first beat began. Having climbed up to the highest point of the forested hill, the three Kashmiri's came down stirring the trees and spindly branches in measured taps with a stick. Suddenly one of them gave a sharp cry and whistled the signal we had prearranged as a warning. I expected a

little musk deer to come leaping out of the bushes, a hundred yards away from me. Instinctively, I pushed the safetycatch forward and levelled my gun. Nothing happened.

I suddenly felt absurd sitting like that with a poised gun. I wondered if it was necessary at all. Slowly I risked a glance at Jaswant through the corner of my eyes. I turned a full face on him though the gun still remained at my shoulder. I would have been too pleased to damn him for that easy look, had not a slithering form shuffled unseen through the branches.

The first beat proved a disappointment. Absence of luck during the first beat is generally said to be necessary to motivate a more determined effort through the rest of the shoot. The principle, howsoever consoling, did not mitigate the heaviness we felt. It merely increased the frequency of sinking into waist deep crevices.

Every time we took up positions to face the approaching beaters and waited impatiently, we only found the three taut faces emerging out of the thicket. It pained me to notice a badly disguised look of self-castigation on Mohammed Zaman's face. He did not however communicate his feelings of remorse to us. He fussed about us like a busy body and would rather have preferred to make us believe that there is a nebulous joy in failure than that the shoot had proved barren.

An hour passed.

"He, ho sahib," shouted Mohammed Zaman excitedly. He was kneeling over a patch of reddish yellow and scanning a print of tiny hoof marks on the snow. "It has urinated here. It must not be far off".

The three Kashmiris jerked forward along the trail left by the hoof-marks. We followed them closely. The trail

led to the circular walk ringing the outer edge of the Gulmarg forest ridge. Crossing the track, it fell sharply down an escarpment of rock and snow and evened itself out on a snow field below.

The obstacle was baffling. The musk deer was certainly clever in having taken it. It had skilfully counted on our incompetence to negotiate it without difficulty. Mohammed Zaman quickly appreciated the situation with Jaswant. It was decided that Jaswant and I were to take up appropriate positions on the circular walk while the two Kashmiris went down by another route to the snow field and chased the animal. Mohammed Zaman was also to descend the height of the escarpment and position himself to cover the open flank.

The basic considerations for this plan were simple. The animal was to be driven up and shot at a disadvantage, when it was clambering up the slope. Any attempt on its part to veer off from the path we wanted it to take was to be scaled off on one side by a sheer drop and on the other by Mohammed Zaman.

A controversy arose. The two merry faced Kashmiris with the cheap glass beads gleaming over their skull caps, thought it unwise to go down to the snow field by another route. In their opinion the escarpment was a reasonably safe descent. Efforts to convince them failed. Before we could emphasise our point, they were glissading down the treacherous fall. Mohammed Zaman looked bewildered. He eyed us shyly, smiled and seeing that youth is really incorrigible went hurtling down after them. We took up our positions behind cover and I lit a cigarette.

Before me I could see the thinly veiled white line of mountains on the horizon. In a patch of blue sky above it, the lonely fogged peak of Nanga Parbat stood out. The en-

tire valley, extending from beneath the mountainside I was sitting on to the Himalayan massif was covered with broad white sheets of water, poplar clumps, groups of thatched squat huts, the spiralling sweep of the Jhelum, and the turmeric yellow of blossoming mustard fields. Beneath the stillness of the scene, a vibrant and powerful life throbbed ceaselessly. This was the valley we had come to defend in

when its ageless and dignified silence was disturbed by a handful of self-glorying vandals.

My reflections were suddenly shattered by a delicate form slithering up a gully on the side of the escarpment. Mohammed Zaman bellowed from below warning me of its approach. The animal was a musk-deer, light chocolate in colour with large, round and dark eyes. It did not notice me cooped up behind a boulder. With graceful strides it moved up unsuspectingly and stood a few yards away in tense anticipation. As I levelled my gun to aim, its instinct forewarned and it flinched. Turning towards Mohammed Zaman's flank it took a leap. My eyes closed and I fired. The pellets must have struck it in mid-air for it crashed on the snow with a thump. Blood came out of its belly where the pellets had pierced. A streak of blood also oozed out from the corners of its mouth and a painful look of supplication filled its eyes. I felt a most unsportsmanlike pang of remorse.

On hearing the gun shot, Jaswant and Mohammed Zaman came and crowded around the dead animal. I must have seemed a depressing sight to them for Jaswant extended his hand in congratulations. He spoke softly saying that a dead female was not a bad sight after all.

The day was not to end with that only. Mohammed Zaman thought it highly improper that a deer which had

lost its doe should have the right to live. He insisted on the pursuit of the deer that, being more cunning, had escaped.

It did not take them long to search out the deer's trail. Once again we scrambled in the snow and at appropriate spots laid out the usual gamut of an ambushcade-beaters, stops, guns.

The matchless deer appeared in the last beat. It was a beautiful animal, slim, sturdy and rhythmic. Instead of coming straight up, it traversed; providing a delightful moving shot. I fired twice, but I missed both times. I had really no reason to be perturbed by my awful performance because luck had favoured me the first time. Mohammed Zaman voiced a sage consolation: "Don't bother, Sahib. He who has saved its life is far greater than he who can only destroy it." It was like putting me in my place.

The day was fast maturing. It had only snowed once during the time we were romping the forest. Irregular patches in the sky had widened and joined to show up an intense blue firmament.

We sat down to lunch under a pair of conifers. The winter-chilled wind soughed restlessly among the tree tops. Ignoring the cold, Jaswant removed his socks and sat drying them over a fire Mohammed Zaman had lighted. Mohammed Zaman heated up our food over another fire around which the two Kashmiri's sat eyeing the stiffened doe. They chatted eagerly in their quick spirited dialect and one didn't have to understand it to conjure an image of two lip-smacking fiends relishing their well earned flesh.

After lunch, I began to reflect upon my life as an Army officer in the valley. I looked at Jaswant, the dear snobbish friend who was extraordinary yet whose pretensions verged on the comic. I thought of others too, who were not there,

S—, K—...., there was my battalion; my men with whom I had experienced that astringent mystery of grateful comradeship welded in hazards. This mystery was elusive of definition, one only felt, imbibed and cherished it.

We returned to our room in the evening. Our orderlies had kept a fire going in the bokhari and the room was like a turkish bath. Outside the windows the snow was piling up. We huddled into quilts and sat sipping the mature-brown twinkling balm. After some time I don't think we reflected at all. We merely agreed that all those who deprive themselves of sensible pleasures by self-righteous controversies are well, to say the least, missing a lot in life.

SPRING MEMORIES

SPRING MEMORIES

[R—, a new acquaintance told me of his experience in his own style; half real, pungent, courtier-like and reliable. I have converted in into a story with an immodest 'I'].

The early spring buds have long since opened in the North. March has come and gone and in its happy clear days the moon has described a full phase. Holi with its sprinkling of colour has also gone by. The memory of March thrills for it is shaped as a symbol of the happiness of other years.

But I do not figure why thoughts of the North and its spring affluence comes to me most as I lie on the sands of the Elliots beach.

The sand is painfully dazzling; only the sharp slap of the rolling surf and the magnitude of the blue sea beyond with its dark masts lessens the pain. I watch the women, mostly Europeans; running gleefully out of the shacks. Children follow them, dangling coloured pails in their hands. They do not heed the shouts of the South Indian maid and she knows that unless she holds them forcibly, they shall run into the sea.

I have observed one of those women with interest. She has curious habits. She takes a walk along the beach just where the water labours to its sweeping limit. She thrills in merely wetting her feet. Sometimes when the surf swells unexpectedly she squeals, raises her dress with a casual grace and then runs away.

A passing delight of spring, a fancy, a desire for longing and reminiscence—that is what she is I tell myself

when on a Sunday she does not appear. I feel her absence bitterly. A curious thought occurs to me. I have to reassure myself that this is not the same girl I almost was betrothed to three years ago.

Three years isn't long but a reference to it as 'those days' or 'long ago' is pleasantly satisfying. It may be that each one of us likes to preserve memories of our youth by clichés against the reality of a broken image.

I was twenty-two—adventurous, dreamy and unnecessarily sad about platitudes I did not understand. The requirements of my profession and the accompanying financial independence had induced in me a love for wandering. During my leave period I had been trekking in the Liddar valley, north of Pahalgam in Kashmir. A surly beard and an unruly mop of hair amply suggested that the trek had been arduous and manly. On my return I had taken up lodging in a hotel on the bank of the Liddar river. The hotel was a double-storeyed building with an enclosed garden and a path leading to the junction of the Liddar and the Chandanwari rivers. During the season the place was reputed to be crowded to distraction and out of season it was the home of migratory swallows. The setting was nevertheless romantic and picturesque.

That was where I saw Z— for the first time. One could not fail to see her after that. She had to pass the corridor in front of my room in order to go up to her lodgings on the first floor. Her family comprised of an uncle, a timid looking old man, with a pair of dove-like melting eyes, and a young lout of a brother. It was apparent from the way Z— looked after her brother that their parents were no longer alive.

I liked Z— and evidenced my liking by watching her

every day, stretched out on an easy-chair in the garden with a bunch of flowers lying on a table closeby. Sometimes she would fondle the flowers and brush their dew over her cheek with a slow, sensuous gesture. Upon seeing her brother come through the garden gate, she would jump up impetuously and run up to him. This was a pleasing routine for me till one day I realised I was being watched myself by the old uncle.

I began to fear that the old man's suspicions had been aroused. He did not appear to be of stern disposition though. There was a lamentable and submissive look in his eyes which was strangely contradicted by a set jaw. It seemed as though a secret burden had bowed him to a point where he was determined to cast it off.

One morning, to my surprise, he came up to me while I was taking my breakfast in the garden. We had not spoken to each other till then.

"I have found out about you", he began. Aren't you in small business?"

I extended my hand to his which was clammy and soft. His eyes were melting pathetically. A shiver ran down through me. For the next few minutes he plied me with questions relating to who I was, where I came from, what my father did, and so on. I found this annoying but politeness prevented me from clarifying my attitude, I attempted to change the subject. However, I told him I was very much impressed by the sprightliness of his young nephew; an observation quite divorced from fact. This was unfortunately regarded by him as an indication to embark upon the virtues of his family.

"Not so much that boy", he began. "He eats too much

and since their mother died, the poor girl finds it difficult to control him."

"The little that I have seen of them convinces me that she has him in control," I said. "He seems to love her very much."

"She spends a lot of time mothering him. Otherwise she had such interests," he replied.

"Household?", I said for the sake of saying something.

"I wish they were household," he sighed. "Art was her strong point. She was a painter."

"What does or did she paint?" I asked. This interested me.

"Me," he said triumphantly. "When I showed the portrait to a famous artist; incidentally you should be knowing him. He is from your District."

"Yes, I have met him once."

"Well, he said that the girl was talented but that she should turn from portrait to landscape."

"I haven't seen her painting anything here although the morning and evening views are splendid," I said.

"I insisted that she give up painting," he said with parental emphasis, "I did not take your artist's advice seriously. It had been, I thought, an attempt to be polite when he had suggested the change."

"I think you misunderstood him," I said. "He is a saint but calls a spade a spade when it becomes necessary."

"Anyhow, I diverted her enthusiasm to more useful pursuits. She sews, cooks and tends me well."

I did not realise I had been talking to him so long. I was conscious of an uneasy feeling. It could not be without

some set motive that the old man was being so frank with me about his family matters.

There was a perceptible movement in the rose bushes behind us. The old man suddenly seemed to turn pale. We both looked around. Z— was standing looking pitifully at her uncle. Her eyes were wet with weeping. He clutched the sides of his chair and a vacant look of fear came into his eyes. The jaw flabbed.

"Get out of here," he shouted. Then suddenly correcting himself he added, "Run along. This is no place for you."

Z— gave me a long apologetic glance and hiding her tears, ran into the hotel. I was too embarrassed to have looked at the old man. Her sudden appearance had some decisive meaning. He gave me a reason for the outburst of anger. Blood pressure or something. I had seen far too many cases of blood pressure in the Army to have believed him. On the other hand I sensed a sinister but thinly veiled intention. The old man was arranging.

But why must he choose me, I asked myself. Z— was a beautiful girl and he was rich enough to have chosen a man prosperous and settled in life. It could be possible that something was the matter with Z— and he was trying to fulfil his obligations. The whole business was revolting.

I was certain in my mind that Z— had through womanly intuition seen what her uncle was planning. Ever since that day, when she had been scolded by him, a tacit understanding had grown between us. It was a strange situation for both of us looked upon each other with the comradeship of martyrs being sacrificed for the same cause.

Spring had come into its full bloom in the Pahalgam valley. The transistor carrying holiday-makers had multiplied. The hotel was beginning to acquire the festive appear-

ance of a gaudy film setting. A newly wedded couple from Delhi was honeymooning in the room next to mine. The whole night long they played pop-hits and the crazy cha-cha-cha which kept them dancing but allowed me little sleep. I did not lodge a protest for fear of being accused of improper conduct. Besides, I had only to undergo the agony of it for two more days. My time was running out. I had to be in Srinagar in two days' time after which I was to fly down to Delhi.

The old man asked me to tea with him a day prior to my departure. Possibly he was desirous of finalising details, I might have been conceited in my logic but at that time his attentions appeared to have no other meaning for me. I impulsively scribbled a note to him in which I declared that I was flattered by his goodness but I could not concede to any alliance which he might be planning to force upon me. I, however, premitted the possibility of error in my judgement of his intention, in which case, I informed him, I would humbly beg his pardon and gladly present myself at the required time. I was surprised. He had written two sharp words over the contents of my note: "You insulting...."

I did not care for the insinuation. It had only confirmed my suspicions. But in the evening, when my luggage was being carefully stacked in the corridor so that it could be conveniently taken away the next morning, a feeling of sadness came over me. I had seen Z— that morning in the garden drying her hair and humming to herself. She had come out of the bath and her thick black curls clung to her neck and the water trickled over her brow and eyes like the morning dew scattered over the leaves around her. She had had no ornament and her sari was an ordinary white. I wondered what man could be worthy of her. An attempt to be that would have been as cruel as that the edifice of the

ideal or whatever it be that we exalt not too cheaply had been tarnished.

The night was beginning to perish gently when I stepped out on the cobbled stones leading to the Pahalgam taxi stand. The north wind coming from the Liddar valley braced me. I looked up at Z—'s window covered with a light thin gauze. There was a suggestion of repose and muffled sleep behind them. The window-panes glowed even though the sun had not come up as yet.

Before I stepped into the taxi, I scribbled a note to Z— in which I asked her to meet me in Srinagar three days hence, in a cafe overlooking the bund and the Jehlum. I implicitly instructed the bearer of the hotel, who had followed me all the way for 'Bakshees', to hand it over only to Z—. I had based this on what her uncle had told me once of his future plans in the valley.

On the scheduled day I sat waiting for Z— on the balcony of the cafe. Holiday makers were flocking the Shikara Ghats at this hour and the Kashmiris crossing the river in canoe shaped country boats for an anna wondered at the extravagance of the people who had money. The decks of houseboats were decorated with rows of flower pots sprouting the miniature blooms of a Kashmir spring. A young girl sat picking them up and waving the massacred lot at a man and a woman tugging their country houseboat.

I was watching these sights with a peculiar thrill, little realising it was almost a quarter of an hour since Z— ought to have turned up. Suddenly a stone came crashing down close to my table. Z—'s brother looked up at me with an attitude of purposeful hostility.

"Hey, there!" I shouted, "What sort of manners are these? Want the hotelkeeper to thrash you for this?"

Grimacing, he replied, "Uncle says Z— cannot come because she has gone away."

Before I could question him, he had taken to his heels and was running with the comical tortoiselike gait peculiar to all fat boys.

I paid my bill as quickly as the bespectacled cynic at the counter in his cynically slow way could settle it. Fumbling down the rickety wooden staircase, I ran after the boy before he could disappear from sight. I saw him take a side-lane, one of the many which join the bund to the Residency Road. He ran through a door into the walled compound of an old, musty building, double-storeyed and profusely neglected. I followed him in. As I entered, my gaze fell upon the uncle sitting under a willow in the garden. I stood transfixed and embarrassed.

"Ah, ha! he exclaimed with pretentious surprise. "Welcome, a pleasure seeing you, my friend."

I noticed that "my friend" was something new. It irritated me to realise that he was being sarcastic. I therefore wanted to explain my embarrassment as truthfully and briefly as possible.

"I suppose you do already know that I had asked Z— to come over to the cafe on the bund."

"I know," he replied curtly.

"Why didn't she come?" I asked in anger and agitation.

He appeared to be shocked by my question. He stared at me in a way to convey me the fact that what Z— did was none of my business. Noticing my agitated face he suddenly changed his expression, but his eyes no longer melted.

"No, please don't misunderstand her," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Because I want you to know the truth," he replied.

My old suspicions suddenly rose in my mind and fearing that his unexpected comparison was some unknown form of sarcasm, I gave vent to my feelings.

"If you mean to refer to the alliance you were attempting to bring about, then I would request you to save a lot of embarrassment. That is certainly not beyond the truth."

He laughed a short, scornful laugh. It was a laugh that could easily be mistaken by young people as an expression of a tolerant attitude adopted by the grown-ups at their outlook, which is said to be immature. It has its desired effect by suggestion. It doesn't convince.

"How young and romantic you are! I wouldn't call you anything else because I don't have the right to call you that."

I remained silent.

He continued: "That wasn't my intention. You flatter yourself, do you?"

"No, I haven't done it so far."

"You have no reason to, I don't see why I shouldn't tell you that this is none of your business," he said impatiently.

"I have been educated to be tolerant of people, particularly grown-ups, if they become unbearable," I replied with the purpose of clinching the issue and being reasonable.

He leaned back in his chair and looked at me with a shrewd pair of eyes. There was a glint of recognition in them.

"Don't be angry," he said, "I am only being honest when I say I want to speak the truth."

I was about to ask him if that desire was very unusual but I thought it to be too offensive. He spoke again.

"Listen to me seriously and see if you can believe me. This will put matters straight. Now this girl is a bit off her mind. She is loving and incurably dreamy."

I did not know what he was trying to get at.

He continued: "When she was very young, her head was full of all sorts of ideas which were quite different from those of other healthy girls. She was fond of going on top of the house in order to get lost in the winter mists. That is just one instance. There were so many others."

I nodded my surprise.

"Another thing she wanted to do was to lay down her life at the slightest possibility. She was rather devoted to a cousin of her's—a boy who wrote poems. He joined the Army during the Kashmir operations, drank himself to death and got decorated. Just before the cease-fire he was ordered to carry out a raid and died on the road beyond Baramulla."

The old man's story was becoming interesting but it appeared to be out of context. I listened to him curiously.

"Z— is a curious girl. I have tried to satisfy every whim of hers except that I could not get back this cousin on whom she quite madly showers all her affection. I brought her to Kashmir because she wanted to come here before her wedding."

"Wedding?"

"Yes, wedding," he laughed. "She is being married before the rains set in. Her fiance is here from Delhi. He does some flourishing business in Delhi—so he proclaims."

"I see."

I tried to say it calmly but I could not hold my spite. I added that he must surely be extremely prosperous to

which the old man nodded his curiously understanding agreement.

But suddenly I felt miles apart from the family, as if I had never existed for them. The only link which held me to them was the strange meeting at Pahalgam and, of course, the unfinished story.

"We came to Pahalgam and we saw you come in from the Liddar valley. At that time we were sitting on the terrace and looking at the meeting of the two rivers just where the two roads in the valley also meet. She saw you and followed your approach and suddenly she says that you are like him even though I can't find the faintest resemblance except the beard and that tuft of hair is what he always had till the Army forced him to take it off. She had had a strange premonition, although she never told me, that she would find some clue of poor Krishan—he was called Krishan. Awfully good and a heart of gold!"

He prodded the earth with his stick as though memory required to be raked up for the truth.

"My first impulse was to drive this mad idea out of her head but I did not do that for fear of what a girl of her kind could do. But on second thoughts I changed my mind and wanted her to be friends with you so that you could give her the satisfaction of belief...."

"She was eager to meet you at your cafe. She had told me of it in Pahalgam itself. But I could not allow it. It isn't permitted in our society, particularly when the girl is being married."

"Where is she?" I suddenly asked.

"Off on a picnic with the prosperous one," he said looking at me shyly.

I rose to go away then suddenly he held my hand. Taking out a bundle of papers from under his chair, he gave them to me.

"What on earth is this?" I asked.

"Keep them or burn them."

"What are they?"

"Poems."

"Whose?"

"Krishan's."

"Why do you give them to me?"

"Because before she left she insisted."

"How did she know I would be here?" I asked bitterly.

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders. Attempting to maintain a composure I asked him whether he realised that we were strangers and that what he was handing me over was written material. It was something that could be more than circumstantial evidence. He laughed heartily, assuring me that he had seen to that unusual aspect.

I carried the bundle of papers in my hand and went out of the neglected garden with sorrow and bitterness in my heart. Just as I was ascending the flight of steps leading to the bund, I thought I saw someone close the shutters of one of the windows of the house I had left. It was a rare moment when imagination builds up fantastic pictures of its own and one likes to think of them with the painful nostalgia of words like 'putting out of candles' or if the image of the 'hyacinth' girl had been shattered for good.

The bundle of poems was dropped in the Jhelum a few

days hence to the merriment of Kashmiri women squatting in their houseboats.

The surf slaps, the fishermen return in their boats while masts still linger in the Arabian Sea. The sand is hot, the beach is becoming deserted. Roy will come up soon; the lessons for the following day's instructions have to be prepared. But the moon will be there.

AUTUMN MEMORIES

AUTUMN MEMORIES

With autumn close at hand, K— is reminiscently perturbed. He remembers the autumn of other years and begins to wonder what it would be like in Madras. Sitting in his darkened room, he recalls the prolonged greyness of the sky outside and it does not make him optimistic. He gets the idea of living in a colourless oblivion; of merely aging in time.

He senses an on-coming feeling of distaste and fretfulness. He wants to escape its senseless grip, so he drives down to the club, goes up to the bar and sits sipping chilled gimlet. His table commands a view of the Buckingham Canal, across the polished glass windows. He gazes at the cuddled waters, green and monotonously breaking into circles in the limpid, grey afternoon light. Behind the bar-wall a hidden gramophone wheezes an operatic aria which no one hears.

After a while he becomes pleasantly unconcerned about other people around him. His deep set eyes, devoid of self-consciousness, begin to sparkle at the thought of autumn in the Kangra Valley, four years ago. But it isn't a sparkle of joy. There is a fugitive trace of regret in them; crumbling leaves, he says to himself looking at the swift descent of yellow and ochre coloured shakings, from the trees on both sides of the canal. 'It was long ago', he wants to say but that sounds conventional, used; so he merely begins with, 'At that time...'

Yes, at that time he was younger and was home on leave. The month was September, the sky a soft-blue and the early autumn flowers were lying crushed within the limp, watery grass grown high during the rains.

He had then not fully grown out of dreams. Consequently he thought a great deal of his aspirations. He had wanted to turn to art while he was at the Military Academy. But having received no encouragement, nor having had the inclination for any particular form of art, he had resigned himself to thinking of it in his spare time; especially when he managed to get leave. He would grow a beard, behave irresponsibly and sport the usual bohemian eccentricities inspired by a western education.

One day he was sitting in the lawn, watching the iridescent blue spreading over the Dholadar massif. There was no snow on the mountains at that time of the year. They stood gaunt and fissured. He thought of winter when misty plumes would rise from their white masses, concealing the summits.

His grandmother was in a chair beside him, taking peas out of their husks for the evening meal. He turned to look at her. She was absorbed in this trifling occupation in the same way, he remembered, she had been when he was a child.

"N-ji", he said lazily.

"Hm", she muttered not looking up from her work.

"N-ji", he said looking at the Dholadars. "I want to go where the fairies beat the grain out of the husk."

"What?" she asked incredulously not knowing what he was talking about. He looked at her lovingly, wondering why old people lose their memories so soon. She was the one who had told him of how the fairies would gather on the mountain which had structures like fort walls over its summit. They would be there mostly on moonlit, autumn nights when the wind was temperate and smelled of fresh pine leaves and rain. Ever since he was a child he had longed to go there. Now that he was grown up, he did not have

the heart to disown the fable as childish claptrap. And may be he wasn't utterly honest with himself. There were occasions when he thought there might be something in the story.

"You have forgotten", he said half reproachfully. She raised her head, and blinking her eyes behind her thin-panned spectacles, remembered the tale.

"Che" she made a lisping sound. "Are you in your senses. Those blocks up there are only rocks."

"I know that", he said, dismissing the idea. His grandmother would never have agreed. How people lost their sense of the beautiful things they wanted others to believe in, he thought derisively, sinking into the soft-turfed grass. But may be it wasn't his fault. She had had her own suffering.

"I will go to Kulu", he began again after some time, pursuing the idea of going somewhere. She raised her head, looked at his beard, his ruffled hair and the flowing youthful freshness on his face, and sighed deeply.

"Simple child", she said by way of her assent. He rose, embraced her and planting a kiss on her wrinkled forehead, ran into the house.

"Do look after yourself, child", she had said as they parted. He had not been offended by the diminution of his youth. In fact he still liked being treated as a child for it reminded him so much of days long past. On the other hand his grandmother treated him as a child not only because he still remained that to her, despite the beard he had grown, but because she was secretly proud of his newly acquired status in life. "Haven't you seen my little K—now?", she would ask some visitor. He is working in Delhi. He lives in the President's House....

He was walking to the railway station three miles away.

The delicious smell of burgeoning rice fields, soaked in water, was coming in slight wafts.

He passed the mill where he had, as a child, often sat watching the gurgling spray eject from the mill-stones churning below. In those days the building had been a disfigured arrangement of underbricks and slates. It had now a new gabled front supporting a coloured board, on which was written the name of the proprietor in an elaborate, artificial hand.

Bali-di-kul, a wide fast flowing stream, accompanied him all along his way to the station. As a child he used to regard it as a very powerful river and because of the forbidding myths of its swollen viciousness, he had graded it one step below the mysterious ocean. Walking beside it, he now experienced a superior's kinship with it, although he couldn't dispel the despairing need to be thankful to its secret, nervous laughter for the images of a vanished world.

When he arrived at the station, the train just steamed in. He took a coupe and laid out his luggage neatly inside it. He selected a book and would have settled himself to reading, when he suddenly realised that one could never be certain how long the halt at the station would be prolonged. The staff on the Kangra Railway was prone to treat the schedule and regulations with levity. This was due to the absence of fussy, inspecting railway officials from the plains on these trains. The other officials too never travelled by trains. They preferred the casier and shorter road journey. And this was what made the station staff think they were on a volunteer mission of merely keeping the trains going.

Ordinarily, a lapse in public functions irritated him. His stay in Delhi and the endless governmental talk had strangely inspired in him a love for the constantly used and hackneyed

dicta: 'One man's meat is another man's poison, so do your duty and do it well' or 'An efficient administration is the backbone of a self-respecting State.' Thoughtlessly, almost ruthless to his varied inclinations, he took particular care to talk and behave responsibly.

Yet, in spite of his careful citizenship, he enjoyed slight departures, an occasional break, a few snappy indiscretions. At such moments, he felt a craving to be someone other than himself, like the poker faced military observers he had known in Kashmir, who placidly viewed the heated conflicts in which they had no part to play.

He did not, therefore, go up to the station master, reveal his identity and inform him of the deplorable state of affairs. He merely walked along the train, looking at the soldiers going home and the faces of Pahari women, half concealed in their muslin duppatas.

While he had been strolling on the platform, he had not noticed a woman in the compartment next to his, staring at him with tear-sapped, penetrating eyes. But the moment he was about to step back into his coupe, he saw her. He winced instinctively. 'My god', he thought. 'Here it comes again'.

He had been reading Turgenev the previous night. The memory of Tanyas and Mashas was fresh in his mind. The story had been about the hero coming back to his country-estate from some war with the Turks. His carriage was jolting along a dusty road in the evening light. Corn-fields bloomed gold on either side. Occasionally he peered out and looked at the carefully bordered fields. Suddenly, his eyes caught a young peasant girl hidden within the corn-fields, gazing at him. Her clothes were torn and there were bruises on her shoulders and throat. He had seen too much of the war and

would have gone on his way. But the thought of the loneliness of corn-fields, away from the village, and the falling dusk made him order the coachman to halt.....

She was alone in a third class compartment for ladies next to his coupe. As he settled in the green upholstered seat, he began to think who she could possibly be. Forsaken, cheated—he was sure of it being something 'of that kind.

She was plump, slightly fattish. Her hair was knotted loosely and fell on her bare skin outlined by a low-cut Kameez. He was then still inexperienced in figuring out the age of a woman, but he put her around twenty-eight.

While he was speculating in the soft, plushy comfort of the green upholstery, the guard blew his whistle and perked his green flag triumphantly. But the train did not move, although it hooted shrilly. Irritated, he jerked his head out of the window. The guard had apparently changed his mind about moving the train for he was secretly talking to an evil-looking fellow with thick oiled hair parted in the middle, showing the prominent bumps above the forehead. K— would not have cared about it but for the curiously intriguing gestures they were making towards him. They were evidently discussing him. His mind became alert and he slowly shifted his eyes towards the woman in whom he saw the shadow of a helpless fear. So this is what it is, he thought smirkingly. The thought of chivalry in its old sense irritated him.

Shortly, the train was off spitting smoke over the rice fields, swaying in the criss-cross of autumn winds. He saw the brown coloured thatch over the village huts, the flashing gables and windows of painted glass. Strings of women, swaying forms of orange and red, were going down to fetch water from a stream close to the railway line. He watched

them cover their faces instinctively and shy away from the train. Simple, unadorned Indian bashfulness, he pondered reflectively.

When the train halted at the next station, the guard followed by the evil looking fellow came striding towards K—. The lines on the guard's face twitched and his eyes narrowed with purpose. There was the assured look of the successful detective in them.

Having seen the two coming, the woman hurriedly got down from the compartment and made her way with light, mincing steps towards the sliding, away from the main exit. He realised that she had been travelling ticketless and was now making a quick escape.

"Do you know that woman, Sir," the guard asked nervously, hoping to obtain a negative answer and following her movements tensely.

"How on earth would I know her?" K— replied feeling irritated.

Satisfaction glowed on the guard's face for K—'s answer set him on his track. Saluting K— absurdly, he walked off after her. The evil looking fellow hung to his side like an accomplice who has proved useful.

K— saw them cornering the woman and exhorting her to produce a ticket. He saw the evil looking fellow touch her and suddenly he felt blood rushing to his face. But he did nothing and sat back in the seat. Experience had taught him to keep away from affrays for they could prove tardy.

He lighted a cigarette. Blowing out the smoke in long, thin lines, it curled upwards and disappeared in shreds under the moving fans. Outside there was a burst of laughter, pointed and vulgar. Impulsively he looked out.

A screw faced man was passing by his compartment having had his amusement in the circle formed around the woman. K— could hear the guard's shrill voice rising, but it was unintelligible in the continued din of other voices.

"What is going on there?" he asked the screw faced man.

"She is on sale," he laughed, pleased at his discovery.

"What do you mean?"

"The guard says that anyone who can pay the fine for her can have her," he giggled hideously. "Do you think anyone will stake his reputation or be able to pay that much?" he added questioningly as though others were already in agreement with him on that score. Contorting his face for no particular reason, he walked away.

K— felt a remotely disquieting sense of guilt. He thought of the girl in the novel, standing alone in the Russian cornfields, with her eyes following the carriage. He heard the guard's voice again, high and irritating like an auctioneer's at a cattle show.

Imitative, consciously imitative world; yet he was going to act. Quickly, almost decisively he stood up, stepped out of the compartment and started going towards the group. He rejoiced secretly in his bashfully awakened chivalry.

"In case nobody frees her," the guard was shouting as if she were his possession, "I shall be obliged to take her to the next station where there is a Thanedar Sahib. He will sort her out."

K— came up to them.

"Nobody thinks of women as their mothers or sisters. . . ." The guard was continuing in his auctioneer's tone.

"Where is the Station Master?" K— broke in loudly. He was surprised when eyes turned attentively on him. He

felt awfully military, in spite of his beard which was contrary to regulations.

"We haven't a Station Master here," replied a constipated looking, shrivelled man in the tone of an usurper. "He is gone, I am the Assistant."

"Let her go," K— said pointing to the woman who was standing apart, weeping in hiccups. Her head was hanging over her bosom and her hair was dishevelled.

The Assistant had never been spoken to in that way since the British had left. The commanding tone outraged his idea of the independent man. He did not feel certain of K—'s position. He still had the fear of the official who could use devious methods to have him sacked. So he decided to swallow his pride, forfeit his independence and avoid open resistance. He glanced at the guard for assurance but didn't find it in the latter's eye.

"Will you pay the fine for her?", he asked.

"Yes," K— answered curtly. "I will."

"Is she related to you?" he said insinuatingly, hoping to arouse the crowd.

"No, she isn't and you know that."

"How can I be sure of that, Sir," said the Assistant smilingly. "It is for the police to determine."

K— almost succumbed to the polite provocation. But he retained his composure.

"If that is the case, let me tell you, Mr. Assistant Station Master, that I am an Army officer," he said feeling guilty of using his position to advantage over a petty official.

"I don't see why all this was necessary if you still consider it a police matter. I shall take necessary measures

against your conduct today, when I return." In his heart K— knew he would never bother himself to make complaints which were never pursued for correction. But he felt pleased with himself at the effect the speech made on the Assistant, in the presence of so many people.

"Well," the Assistant began peevishly, trying to save his face by assuming a rude attitude. "The fine is twenty rupees."

K— handed him the money and turned to go back to his compartment.

"Let her go now," he said to the Assistant who had begun scribbling something in a note-book.

"I am not stopping her," he said. "I am just preparing the receipt."

"Give it to your friend here," K— said indicating the guard who looked worn out and abject, dejected at the loss of open and sinful pleasures to be drawn from a despairing woman's body. He looked at K— reproachfully but to conceal his regret, he shouted at the woman.

"Thank your benefactor," he said. "Come, look at him, thank him. He is a very extraordinary man. . . ."

But she did not move. She stood transfixed with her head still hanging on her bosom. When the Assistant gave her the receipt, she winced suddenly and clutching the paper in her hand began to run. Her head remained lowered and she did not look at anybody.

An extraordinary man, my foot. He gulps his drink, orders his lunch and waits patiently.

The canal water has turned gloomy. It also seems to have aged with time.

The bar is deserted except for a pink-faced director of some firm, who is sitting at the far end, devouring a newspaper with stern, bulbous eyes. Occasionally, he glances quickly at himself in the bar mirror above the neat row of liquor bottles but being dissatisfied with his looks, pursues the column more sternly. Damn him, K— shrugs his shoulders cynically.

A few tables away a slightly drunk woman, comically aware of her role, is giggling. At the end of each long drawn out giggle, she takes a breath which makes her sound like a hyena. For some secretly funny reason, one of the men sitting by her side fondles her nose at intervals and her giggles multiply. A small drink, just a small one before lunch, like having one for the road.

And yet K— thinks he is being clever when he tells others that he doesn't know what autumn would be like in Madras.

POEMS

FROM THE OUTPOSTS

MORNING

Through the midnight splendour of rain-drops
In the haze of the dewy stars;
A trembling ecstasy prepares the sleepless
For martyrdom....

The morning mist is lit
Particle to particle in glowing suffusion
And all ashiver
The pine leaves wait

But the sun young and modest,
Goes deep into the clouds;
And the dark mists
Move aimlessly in the wood.

AUGUST TWILIGHT

The virgin keli is thrilled
By the last drops which on its blossom;
Tremble in the cloudy echoes
And fall dead.
Swaying,
The fevered pines fade in the twilight
And tired lambs drop bleating
Drunk in some marvellous ecstasy.
At eve the soul is damp
In the melancholy of shifting mists
Pensive in the infinite,
Proud, lonely, aburst with life.

AN EVENING THOUGHT

The faint restlessness will not leave me yearning
But will spill the shores of an empty vessel,
Die and nourish no revenge.

In the dawn

Where a few lilac clouds

Await the bursting;

The shores will vanish and life upstart

And when the departing day

Softens the torn sunset clouds

The stars will pour their light

From a silent sky.

ON THE MENDHAR BANK

When lily frost upon my eyelids lies
The closing gloom brings my youth relief
Quiet in parting yet secretly touched
The modest Mendhar gently flows;
The stars arise, the moon comes up,
Compassed within my window's view
A hope of nebulous eternity....

In my warm and darkened bunker
Where Bokhari fires are lit
Hushed, secret and happy sounds without
Simper with the fragrant moon washed breeze
To console the hours of lonely distress.

REMINISCENCES

Beyond my door I watch the darkness spread
Upon the mountains where growing mists long since
Have left childhood innocence
Startled in her own secrets of love.
The rain falls, it patters on the slates
Ah happy lady with ringlets dark as evening azure
Who did make of him
A brother and a child.
Why else her hair carelessly toss,
When flushed with the joy of snow
Hold my hand
And bound into the fall of winter.
The rain falls; she is close.
She steps to pause and listens to the night,
I gaze still, my head on the door,
The candle drips her last.

LIDDERWAT EVE

Beyond the mountains two hopes linger;
One that brings the dawn, the sky and sparkling snows,
Gentle offerings through a brood of firs,
Womb's delight and tender infancy,
To other in silence keeps redress.
I stand at sunset on mountain tops
And hope of home still lies beyond,
Farewell! do I in dumbness plead
or am I in prison bound?

REFLECTION

Where life is just a tremor of a silent faith
I cannot restrain the wind stealing into my sense
To remind me in whispers that I to airy wonds do belong,
Where agonised neglect gives way to dreams
And the song of birds is reason.
So of the self styled life I lead
I know of the impulse that lead me to it.
O if the wind were to wipe its dew
Against my brow,
And gently persuade the leaves
To whisper the music
Of their rustling plays,
I should have sensed a value
In my own time.

BONDAGE

What if our brooding fetish crumbles
In an agony of selfless abandon;
While our historic lives
Like smouldering monuments at noon
Ruin and seek their rest;
So that the desolate river so close
Whispers no secrets save our own
And the cold stars of the night keep watch
Over a lonely bed.
And yet the chains that loudly clang,
Bind my youthful breast.

EVE

When I see that lone leaf trembling in an unknown wind,
The after-glow of sunset on the western sky,
The solitude of eventime and muffled calmness.
This lifeless time to me appears
A powerful being.

Those ghostly clouds; like shapes from a burnt pyre rising
The eternal sounds of sleep recalling
All life to shed its toil
And bear to rest its soul.
When I see this and that lone evening star,
Throbbing in stillness its pale and mysterious light,
I feel there is above me a countenance
Which uplifts me
And leaves me in silent thought.

THE OTHER POEMS

YEARNING

In the play of light and fire
In the glow-worm night
Velvet clothed and rent high up
With dripping christmas lights,
I saw a shade, a form, one face
Like I in my childhood had loved
and forgotten to phase and recur
At each panging slight of passing years.

Only when the garden's full of streaming ribbons
And the air a marvellous testimony of tired afternoons,
Lingering with the smell of beer and cigar fumes
And wrappers in the dust,
I lay my heart on the cold stone of time
And watch new looks, faces, roses in the hair,
Lemon saris smirched with vermilion
And like a sculptured form,
Modern and intrinsic,
I stretch my arms skywards
To link the thing that was and would be.

PASSING OF TIME

I think of a forgotten spring ardour,
A life consumed as a thin trail
Disguised as effort to an end,
Writhing pitifully.

And I see the eyes of women
That have fixed my eye
In an endearing enchantment
Of desire unfulfilled

I have wondered at the ambivalence
of the cant,
But if those years come back to me
I would live them over
Only a little more consciously
Only a little less enthusiastically.

My love unsought but waiting patiently
In the dark velvet of an arbour,
In a thatch of dreams by a lonely brook
Gurgling its sunlit songs beneath the shadow of mountains

Where once in childhood
I flung my rosy wings
In the trembling umbra of the morning
And cried without thought.

RAIN AT NIGHT

It is an uneasy morning,
The crackle of lightning casts a glancing blow
On the cloudy canvas
And rapt, enraptured, the banana stalks
Outside my window
Sway in pangs of flight
In my heart throbs the rattle of dusty echoes,
Of jingle bells and mule trains
Trailing a line in the blue air,
While above the snow-fleeced peak
Now dark, now glistening as the clouds roll by
I see a sign splashed in streams of lightning
Over the thinning trickle of glaciers
And the wind torn fury of winter gales.

MORNING LOVE

We are the repetition of souls
Elements of the dark esoteric night of grandeur
When your hand stretched to mine
Lies palm upon palm burning, impure.

You try to shake off the night
Hidden in the richness of your hair,
But when with careful fingers
I lift them from naked shoulders
You implore me not to be careless,
Not to barter my self-possession
For withering things.

The night wanders through some primeval age
Of mist and rock and neon lights,
A paling sceptre, the moon does touch
The horizon's rim.
Leaning over the brink
I am still curious to know your response
Haste for the twinkling lights
Send a chill through me
Of faded time;

As it is ti's bitter
That the owl's cry can contemplate
The secret agony of our disturbed solitude.

MONSOON SHOWER

When first the kite flew
And the sparrows tittered
Dust whirled beneath the horses' hoofs
And a cloudy chill from across the sky flew
Darkening the air with a moisty ennui.

I tossed my head in the wind free shower
To feel the thirst from the slaked dirt
That on the trees its patterns had carved
To linger awhile and then slip.

Soft whimpering rain fell drowsily that day
Cracked on the pavements
Chipped the dusty trail,
The violets in pots swayed with breathless haste
To sigh....ah alas, isn't it the rain?

The carts on the track, the girls at their windows,
The kawak of the crow and the lament of the willow
Would have held but not been there
If the wind and the rain had not rumbled in.

Drip, chip, clip and nip,
It is the rain flicking its myriad lips.
She brings darkness, not an elegy of time
Close compress of youth and lovers' ties
A presentiment of hope and a wily chill.

THE SIMPLE TRYST

How the phantom of maiden bashfulness
Beamed on her virgin face,
Went it like the shying emergence of sparkling waters
Out of a shadowy frown.
Draw not thy coarse veil, ye simple village lass
Minc eyes were not cast
To look on stone.

ON CREATION

Like the new born sun that feels the virgin form of snows
With a caressing hand
Touching it lightly, its desires to ravish their beauty grows
And the desire supersedes all senses.
In the passionate exhilaration is kindled
The warmth of the close touch,
Becomes it warmer still, till it melts the snows
Smoothing their virginity into creation
Of a child that in jubilation strides
On its playfields of stony streams,
While in pride the lover and beloved watch
Him washing my feet in frivolous glee.
Awaken! Life is a maddening birth
Of endless fires in the human heart.

MORNING DANCE

Paranoid edge; this life in early mornings,
Traffic hoots and girls in night slippers,
Cha-cha-chas and coffee sippings
By juke boxes
Are kindred feelings of homage
To our contemporaries.

No invitations but all in a mood
To escape in clappings
A sordid ape
The glory of starry people;
It overshadows us,
That is why we avoid the flood
Of the great fuss.

Knowing unconsciously
A little cynically
Knowing all the same
The meaning of life too early.

Coffee sippings and cha-cha-chas,
Heavy eyed in the morning breeze
We return and take a stroll
For fear that we lie.

KANGRA MUSINGS

Seeing these two Gadi women
In antiquated ornamental finery,
Thrashing the golden stalks
Their supple waists bending over the black girdle.
Eyes beholding an old man and his child,
He in his stooped hunch straddling,
The child on pebbled stones squirming
Watching swallows play hide and seek,
Remembering his little sister on rocky steeps,
With whom by eve he would play.

Playful sheep on high hills flocking,
An old woman clinging her life long weariness on a pole,
An unknown turbaned soul picking coddung strewn
By simple life amid nature's life.
All these sights sunk deep in commonalty
Call me to the open sky and the winds
And the Dholadar ranges,
Where the placid silence of day amid rushing waters
Reminds me of occasional sobriety in youthful glee.

Seeing these pastoral nonentities, I love life for it gives me much
Without my asking.
I like its struggle because in liking it
I do not feel a parasite on what it gives.

THE INNER SELF

The approach of night on sunset glows,
A star, a solitary twinkling star,
Carries to the earth the breath of soundless communion
This one moment's stillness
Bears on its edge
A grandeur....

There is no stir,
There could be none.
The earth is windless
The sky—a graven dome of the earth
I, betwixt these,
A solitary martyr to their unconscious travail.

Let me to these obsessions
Be a worthy victim
And I shall speak from my inner self.
And hold the passing time
A hostage to my expressive will.

FLEETING MOMENTS

Green fields gleefully smile and bare their breasts
To the waning light of the setting sun
As crimson images of the dying eve
Mayest my life be—a dazzling tryst

Away thy miserable garb ye ghostly night,
The sun has stricken the earth with a conqueror's might,
Lifted the ashen locks that swept her face
And gazed breathless at the beauty of his enchanted prize.
There like a trident
The sun through the cloudy mists
Peered its noble head.

One glorious sunset to set astir
Dull and irksome nature
To the hymn of sudden song,
Arouse stifled spirits to cast their mesh.
And soar across the delirious moment.

To—

Let me wither in the embers of this self kindled fire
To entrance my poetic urge in its forbidden warmth,
Elope my natural sense and betray it
To the fantasy of a dawning new desire.
Oh burn my eyes to watch this sweet and delicate soul
Who smiles when God's pretend to blush;
Drown the drunkenness of this restless soul of mine
And make it merry like
My beautiful love.
Only if I had the power to create thy form
I would die to suffer in its creation.

TO—

In thy power, mine is quenched
Then forbid me not thy tortuous charms,
Let me torment!
I know not if worship can make thee bosom me
And make me tread where others fear to go;
Just leave me to myself
With thee—a nothingness
And melancholy loneliness.
Just let me watch
And drown in idle obsessions.

TO SOLITUDE

Where nature creeps into obscurity,
And the long path leads nowhere
There shall I dwell my fair
Where I am alone.

SUNRISE

Change not thy colours, ye bashful bride
Thou hast yet to blush!
When nocturnis veil is brushed aside,
In one splash nectar's sprinkled on still life
Why then hide from me those virginal charms
If I alone see them?

OUTBURSTS

Incarnate of floundering psychic turmoil
Break not the delicate bindings of self obsessed torment,
Blacken all worthless ambition and give womb
To the pure eruption of a nobler spirit
The ushering of bashful effort.

At the brink of cynical moment
Laugh not at the quelling tumult
Bear on on nature's hybrid fantasy,
To create with unappeasable fury
The mind with its leaping spirits and made ogres
That torture to the edge of pleasant suffering.

Inevitable fire! Undying!
Burn my restless spirit
And blur its pain with a bliss,
Screen the senseless world from me
Make me look deeper into the rapturous light!
Alas! Let me fade in view of His eyes.

Midst this dell of nature's mysteries
Moan the sighs of my whispering heart.
A pain, indeed a pain it was
To die in its unabounding garb
To die and be lost
For in beauty, death is worship
And I, its lone priest....

MY BEING

Life silent and powerful like the mountains,
Struggle persistent as the distant sounds of gushing waters,
Soul boundless as the endless sky,
Mind free as the winds of heaven,
Love blooming as the strike of the first sunbeam
On the opening pollens of a lotus,
Joy overbearing like the opening of festal flowers,
Tears glistening as the morning dew
Sorrow deeper than the depth of sad eyes,
Beauty tenderly caressing like the fragrance of a gentle breeze,
Association fragile like the petals of a waning flower,
Friendship deep,
Companionship suffused with the strains of a woman's grace,
Ambition flaming as the star of morn,
Life's end quick as a shooting star
Memory—evermore
In short, life a madness.

A FLING OF MEMORY

Darkness trembles on this rainy day,
In quiet murmurs the muffled music of the water plays,
Blazing lightning spreads its meteor trails
Rumbling thunder in exultant joy awakes
A harbinger of rains to all,
A gnawing pain to me....
I alone feel the pining memory
That misty darkness, the rippling sounds;
All lurk upon this dreary eve....
A brewing storm that lasps in me
The month of Sawan now so nigh
Come ye rains! come! come!
Bring forth those chimes, those vagrant tunes
But alas! that time hath fled and she too is
Ages away.
In fear I ask "Will she come?"
Can joy that was, never be again?
The music of the waters plays
And lightning spreads its meteor trails
On, on, my life goes on....

ON HIS SAMADHI

Life that must live to bloom life,
Spirit that must surge unbounden
To make this life a noble trial
Then crown it with a nobler end.

Holy spirit,
The rapture of all ages and all men,
Engraven in the relic of eternal glory.
In thee there lives no time
Eternal is thy bliss
I offer in thy worship, flowers;
A raiment of my soul that searches for truth.

Ask not why those marigolds and roses
Beautify and then wither on his shrine.
My thirsty soul, revel not in worldly acclaim
But in deep concentration submit thyself in his power
Wilt thou then know why thou thirst.

Mahatma, who sprinkled the sacred sindhoor
On an abandoned mother
Worshipped mother India, life giver,
And made her thy own
Thou art our father.
Bless me to remember what thou said
He is the man who understands the pain of his fellow men
And suffers with them.
In suffering there is salvation
So didst thou show, Father.
Today I stand,
Tomorrow I hope may remain the shadow of my soul,
Pure, genuine and noble; aspiring for the fullest

Expression of the spirit it tenderly held a flower
What death shall mean to me then
A silent sleep in the tempest,
The wakeful life to which it lent a sequel
Expressed.

There always lurks in my heart
A song unsung,
I keep it for my farewell draught of breath
When in the last glitter of life
It will refrain the sweetest
And never again appear on the lips that made it.
Such is the fate of beauty
To fade away before it is full
Then this life must end, to give birth to newer life
And stand at the door of the eternal
With three words
A dear possession of the world it left,
A life in death,
“Ram, Ram, Ram”

THE GUARDSMAN

Upon the charging steed he rode
Regal in mein, handsome in face
The jingling bit and sabre long
Beat in rhythm of the stones.

The panting horse did fume in pride
A master he had with the heart of gold
Courage of Pericles, conceit of a lion,
The mind of a scholar and a love sublime.

A love that had no words for need
A heart that had no passion but she
Yonder towards her the billowing cloud spread on
The man on the mount to her sped on.

Let not the dying day call eventide
To darken the world and pall the night
Lest he to her side be not in time
And forfeit to madness his love divine.

With the fervour of a priest and the fury of a gale
He pierced the air with a resounding beat,
In his heart the fire of love did blaze
To swoon his love with its warmth so sweet.

Upon the sky, beneath the winds
A hundred thousand clouds rolled by,
Now confounded to darkness, his joy still shone
For hers he was; for her he may die

Alas in darkness when 'tempests assailed
The deep blue hills and sighing pines

His panting horse stopped as ordained
To bring his master to his beloved's eye.

Where was she? She was not there
There in desolate darkness nature washed its feet
Little did he know she was not there
Too late he was for her to meet

With sorrow deep and streaming eyes
The proud and dashing soldier he
Fell to earth with humble prayers
"Oh God, Give me my soul that doth flee"

A heavenly voice cried aloud,
"Ye proud Guardsman go thy way"
She waited, she wept and then went away
Your blooming love of youth that was
Now pluck the bud lest it pain

God's angels plucked the rose embowered,
It wept, the morning dew from it shed,
Her image in his mind flickered
Her forgiveness shone in the fading smile.

The dawn blushed on his tired face
Tears of dew around him swelled
Forest streams on the far end rilled
Seraphs and nymphs of heaven gambolled.

The sun lighted the dim lamps of day
Quietness and His mystics played
Upon his being a symphony divine
He laughed, he cried and then he died.

“IN THE KUMAON HILLS”

There in the midst of creation,
I stood alone.
The mountains rose to milky heights,
The twilight treaded its waning course
Then slowly the sun arose.
The orb of fire sprinkled gold
Upon the virgin peaks it chose

My sauntering gaze beheld in awe
The secret caress of the sun and snow,
But too secret for us to see
For soon a mighty breeze arose
And washed my eyes in its chilling cold.
Gleaming tears did blaze mine eyes
Those joy suffused misty tears fell upon the grass beneath
Upon dew they fell like dew drops.

I raised my head but the sun was high,
Lazily it ascended the deep blue skies
Holding the flowing hills and dales
In their sanguine hand of light.
The crescendo of my own thoughts crumbled
Now that the morning ripe with life
Of worldly people did start afresh
Its own feverish and limpid strife.

When no man but I alone
Stood in God's creation,
A mortal I did catch a glimpse
Of nature's exultation.

In the freshness of the sun's birth
Did I bathe in the nectar
That overflowed
And splashed across the sky and earth.

Those mountains that to me did seem
Gentle women with the grace of youth
Now wore the garb of grim austerity
Watching the world with unheeding conceit
Who knows on that morning fine
When the earth and sky lay at nature's feet
A moon of morn was a drunkard too
Of his own time. . . .

FAREWELL

Tears crowd the eyes but remain unshed
Thus many a sorrow must remain, silent, unwept
To sink in the breast
Or spend its meaning like the waning crimson glow.
Sweet cousin,
Altar of sacrifice and pure love
To what clime have you gone
Stealing from my eyes
The joy of a friend's rapture,
Farewell.
God grace your flowing years
With sparkling suns of happiness,
Farewell.

FRAGMENTS

GONE

The evening deepens into darkness.
The abyss growing wide
Till all that we see is lost in gloom
And the night advances like a doom.
A feeling of melancholy embraces me
As I pass the house
What it contained, God only knows
Is probably gone for time!

BIRTH

Look! Yonder the sun rises,
The beacon of this day's journey begun,
Mantled in its vaporous self
It makes a crimson carpet for itself.

ON A VIOLIN

A violin in an old hand looked confident in tune,
An old woman did play the music of our youth

ON KHARAKVASLA

Amid the scattered ruins of past ages
Stands the toil of new times,
Human labour could not demand
A more befitting crown.

I came and went but none too soon
For once I stood on the Pachan gate
Taking a bird's eye view.
I asked myself:
Is this the place where toils
The spice of a nation's life—its youth?

It was dark,
The vanishing lights lent word that work was up
And steeped in fatigue, the young men slept
A sleep of hope and joy
Mingled with the chimes of time
That reverberated from the clock
Shadowed in a pale blue-light.
Let each cadet who toils inside those red stone walls
Bid his spirit awake
That in after life he to himself might say,
I too to this arsenal of my nation's pride did belong.

THAT WINDY DAY

Oh glory to that windy day .
When the crops of summer
Bowed their heads
To the covets of an ethereal sway.

The evening brooded over the countryside
And the sky lay waking in the waning light
Clouds of white ran their heavenly race
Blushing pink at the caress of the setting light.

I walked along the winding ways
And the gentle moisture played upon the face
Unburdened by the sorrows of life.
I found the joys of nature play
Their role of enticing the heart
To raise the mind to airy delights.

ON KHARAKVASLA LAKE

The water beats upon the emerald bay,
Gulping its breath amid the weeds below,
Gushing like a storm upon the bank,
But is soon spent by the marvelling blow
Of nature's finery that envelopes the lake
In green that foretells a silent joy
Of God's benevolence; in the midst
Where I stand and quietly rejoice.
A gentle breeze beats upon my brow
And my eyes close in harmony.

The distant mountains do stand afar,
Fringed with hues of blue and dark,
Surrounded by misty clouds
That embrace the dark in a love so strange
Which speaks aloud, 'I am not too long'.

ABBREVIATIONS

GOC: General Officer Commanding.

CO: Commanding Officer.

DAA & QMG or DQ: Deputy Assistant Adjutant and
Quarter Master General.

ADC: Aid-de-Camp.

EME: Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.

JCO: Junior Commissioned Officer.

Air OP: Air Observation Post.

